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Nadeko Around

001

Let us review the history of Sengoku Nadeko. After all, this will be the end, so allow me to masquerade as an honors student for a bit.[1] At this point, there are no more surprising backstories to uncover, and in the first place, Nadeko had never really been a main character in the *Monogatari* series. If I were to be careful with my words, I would describe her as a supporting role, only there to make the lead role shine even brighter. Of course, the phrase "supporting role" is being very unreasonably careful with my words. It's the most inoffensive choice of words. If I weren't being careful at all, I would say she was a minor character, or even a background character. Those were terms devoid of any affection, but sadly, it was true. It would be a huge lie to say that she was a co-star.

If you would forgive that sadness and allow me to lay out a few more details, the character introduced right before Nadeko was Kanbaru Suruga, who was a pervert, an athlete, and a superstar. And, after writing such an extraordinary oddball, there was an unavoidable situation that made it necessary to write the tale of a creative girl that was completely upright, not at all complex, and purely a victim, completely detached from any doom and gloom—a tale that did not evoke any cognitive dissonance. The following could also be considered Hachikuji Mayoi's stance towards Senjougahara Hitagi, but as I'm sure you all know, Hachikuji-chan had been clearly written to be a perpetrator from the moment she was introduced, which meant that, from the start, she was dyed in complexity and thorny in all directions. Biting in all directions. And, in comparison, Nadeko was a perfectly weak character, with no other characteristics of her own beyond "docile". Now that we're in the Reiwa era,[2] if you were to go back and reread "Nadeko Snake", you might start to wonder if anything beyond the character's name had been decided up until the paragraph right before her appearance, because the character felt *that* much like a rush job. There was really nothing thorny about her, except maybe her name. If I had to say it, she wasn't thorny, but someone who would taper down into nothingness. Someone who'd be scolded for only running on the path that had been laid down for her.

Ultimately, unlike the other heroines, who "were victims but also perpetrators", Nadeko had not been given any depth beyond being a victim, so perhaps not her characterization, but

the depth of her human nature, so to speak, had been shallow—and afterwards, in the sequels and the short stories, there had been a cycle of trial and error and minor changes, but it was undeniable that there was an air of being unable to decide, "This is it!" for her character.

She was practically a lost cause that could have easily departed from center stage without anything feeling amiss, but what changed the course of her gradual fade-out was, without leaving it up for debate, none other than the animated series. At this point, it's a story from over a decade ago, and it can be pretty difficult to speak about the zeitgeist of that era with a sense of reality, but, as though the impossible had been made possible, there had been a serious, tremendous, and astounding breakthrough. To perform some analysis on this front... Because the original work hadn't dug very deep into the character, there were more aspects of her that the anime could freely play around with—for her status as a weak character to become a strong point, you really never knew what could end up becoming a blessing. In any case, it was then that I truly felt the power of Japanimation, the pride of Japan.

In actuality, this saved Nadeko's life.

Thus, Nadeko was not forced to retire and was not released to become a free agent. Rather, she ended up being forced to undergo a deep dive. Thanks to everyone's support, the administration has finally taken action. "Ended up being forced" made it sound like it hadn't exactly been desirable for her to undergo that deep dive, and in fact, this was a particularly controversial, and even divisive, factor—one of the reasons why Nadeko was called "a heroine with wild swings in popularity".

Of course, whenever something is described as having "wild swings" or "ups and downs", it is usually because it's on the decline, as you may have already guessed.

Just as there are no humans that are purely perpetrators, there are no humans that are purely victims—using that framework as the basis of *Monogatari*, the subject of Nadeko's deep dive was, naturally, about the side of her as a perpetrator, which had not yet been told. And there, an unimaginable darkness had been hiding.

The darkness in her heart.

To skip to the conclusion, Nadeko went from a shy middle school girl to a god worshiped on top of a mountain, but even with the star power of the renowned lead roles, it had become impossible to pull her down from her lofty summit. The

idea of a character moving on her own had gone much too far.

She'd really done it now.

That blunder was a fatal wound.

Thus, it ended up as a terrifying story in which the services of a con man had to be relied on. Fighting poison with poison. After digging so deep that it could have leveled a mountain, a new, "I want to be a mangaka" side of her was excavated from underground, and Nadeko was somehow able to descend from her summit. However, she did not come out of it unscathed.

It was not that easy to recover from a fatal wound.

Moreover, just because she'd returned to being human, it didn't mean her problems had been resolved at all, so Nadeko stopped going to school—in realistic terms, or in societal terms, it would be from that point on that things would be really tough for her. And yet, because of her origins as a supporting character, there was no way to proactively tell the story of Nadeko's shut-in days in the Final Season that came afterwards. Once again, she was in a crisis of fading out.

As though she was being shelved, or as though she was remaining unsolved.

And so, using Araragi Koyomi's graduation to draw the main axis of *Monogatari* to a close, there were opportunities to tell the story of what happened to Nadeko afterwards, bit by bit, across Off Season and Monster Season.

Incidentally, to describe how she'd escaped from her fade-out crisis... Originally, the one planned to be Araragi Koyomi's successor as the second narrator was his younger little sister, Araragi Tsukihi, who would become a disciple of Gaen Izuko—traces of that can still be seen with how Ononoki-chan so consistently played the part of an assistant—but Tsukihi's personality was so terrible that the ball was placed in Nadeko's court, instead. I figured I'd reveal those hidden circumstances, for reference.

Once again attesting to the fact that Nadeko owed everything to Tsukihi.

Now, I've kept you waiting.

Finally, even Nadeko's story is about to reach its climax.

At last.[3]

Perhaps you could say that it was fate all along, but as you may have been able to tell from the change in subtitle from what *Shinomonogatari* had been originally, it would not be an exaggeration to say that, with Araragi Koyomi's graduation from university in the first volume, his story has reached a full

conclusion. So those of you who have gone out of their way to reach for the second volume truly have exquisite taste. And rest assured, for with a splendid full-length novel in your hands, there is no way that Sengoku Nadeko, who has, with the conclusion of the anime, gone from wild swings to a complete flatliner—that is, there is no way *I* will do anything to disappoint those of you that are continuing to follow me.

So, get ready.

This is *Shinomonogatari* Volume 2, Final Episode: Nadeko Around.

Enjoy.

"Whoa, I had no idea. So Iriomote Island was actually Taketomi Island!"

"That's right, I had no idea. I had no idea that you were such an idiot."

"Exactly. I guess it's no surprise that people who don't at least graduate from middle school will end up like this. I'll have to keep that in mind when I raise children of my own."

In order, those were spoken by me, Ononoki-chan, and Kaiki-san—from Kaiki-san's words, I could sense a bit of contempt directed towards me, who had dropped out of school, but considering that Kaiki-san had been the one to cover the costs of the plane seats we were sitting in, it would be somewhat lacking in discretion on my part to mention it here.

I had to show that even dropouts could show good discretion.

As the representative of dropouts everywhere.

"No matter what circumstances a dropout may be in, I doubt they'd ever want you to represent them. Sengoku Nadeko, the well-off little lady who'd been such a fool for love that she even became a god."

Kaiki-san was not showing any signs of remorse.

Well, even if you called me a well-off little lady.

From what I'd heard, this man had withdrawn from university himself—perhaps he considered withdrawing from university to be superior to withdrawing from middle school. Though I hadn't actually withdrawn yet... In the first place, I couldn't actually withdraw from middle school, right? As long as I wasn't working on committing some terrible crime... Though I couldn't say that I wasn't working at all.

"So, rather than a middle school trio, we're a dropout trio, huh. I've truly become a member of an interesting team, haven't I."

"Ononoki-chan, it's not like you've withdrawn from school."

"I'm a zombie that withdrew from life."

Well, well.

She was a member of the elite that skipped grades.

Incidentally, that zombie was currently not sitting in her designated seat but in my lap—in terms of dolls, she was like a gigantic Dakko-chan[4], having wrapped her arms and legs around my torso.

Why was she sticking to me like a koala...?

I'd already gotten used to the fact that Ononoki-chan was awfully attached to me, but a hug this passionate was unusual even for her.

I could feel the affection from this expressionless tween girl.

"Don't worry about it. I'm just tired from pulling a doubleheader."

"'Doubleheader'?"

That was a baseball term, right?

I didn't really know much about baseball...

"Uuum, the catcher is sometimes called the pitcher's 'dear wife', right?"[5]

"Not so much these days. Other than by Kanbaru Suruga."

So Kanbaru-san would say it...

Well, she seemed like a person that would.

"Basically, it means fighting consecutive battles. This is the second consecutive battle. A chain of command from the first volume to the second. Since I was used as a means of transport in a time of emergency, you see. Seriously, onee-chan and *oni* onii-chan must have mistaken me for a private jet or something. I'm really grateful that I can ride on a public plane like this."

My thanks to Kaiki onii-chan, said Ononoki-chan—if you thanked a con man, he would just take advantage of you, but it had been quite a shock to learn that Kaiki-san had not treated Ononoki-chan the doll as carry-on baggage, but that he had provided a proper seat for her.

Like a musician booking a seat for his instrument.

Considering she was sitting in my lap instead of her seat, it seemed that thoughtfulness hadn't gotten through to the doll herself... The relationship between these two seemed a bit concerning.

"It wasn't thoughtfulness. It was just a coward's way of protecting himself. Unlike Kagenui or Araragi-kun, I treasure my own life, after all. I don't have the courage to attempt free-falling from several thousand meters high without even a parachute or a life-jacket."

Well, that wasn't even important right now.

It should've been made apparent by my remark in the beginning that our destination was Iriomote Island (though it was probably not so apparent what part of "Iriomote Island was actually Taketomi Island" was silly and what part of it was

actually true, so I'll explain that later), but at present, there was no airport in the world that provided a direct flight to Iriomote Island.

It wasn't exaggerating to say "in the world", either, as Iriomote Island was located closer to Taiwan than to Okinawa's main island—though I hadn't even been aware of those geographical conditions.

Those geopolitics.

However, there was no direct flight from Taiwan, either.

In the first place, there were no airports at Iriomote Island. The only ports were not ports for the air, but ports for the sea. Therefore, the only way to get there was to fly to the nearest island, and continue by ferry afterwards... But, what would be considered the nearest island?

Normally, you'd think of Ishigaki Island.

Because Ishigaki Island was (primarily) where all the ferries came from... So, our itinerary would have looked something like: take the train to Tokyo's Haneda Airport, then fly to Ishigaki Island, and then reach Iriomote Island by ferry. A standard multimodal trip.

An ordinary travel agency would've likely planned it that way... Any navigation app would have done the same.

However, as expected, Kaiki-san's planned movements were completely and totally different.

It was no such forthright method. Or even a fifth-right method.[6]

When Kaiki-san went and booked the tickets on his own, mine and Ononoki-chan's included, he had included a mysterious layover where we would go from Haneda Airport to the city of Naha before continuing onto Ishigaki Island.

A layover, in spite of the fact that there was a direct flight to Ishigaki Island?

If it were a low-cost carrier for overseas flights, I'd heard that the fees were cheaper if you stopped in South Korea or China before heading to Europe... But was it cheaper to stop in Naha first on our way to Iriomote Island?

I didn't know if there were child fares for this flight, but I had been feeling impressed at his sense for economizing on these small details to balance out paying for me and Ononoki-chan, but the truth turned out to be the complete opposite.

It was not a coward's way of protecting himself, but an upstart's way of indulging in luxury.

"On direct flights to Ishigaki Island, they have not yet established a first class, you see,"

explained Kaiki-san.

With a melancholy and sinister tone as always.

"That's why we'll fly to Naha, first. In first class. It's first class, first."

On top of that, Kaiki-san had ended up booking the entire first class on the flight to Naha... He had paid for every seat, not just mine and Ononoki-chan's.

What a big spender!

"I thought you'd be a cheapskate because you were a con man, but you really like to live it up, don't you... That reminds me, when I was a god, you always brought really expensive alcohol, too."

The fact that we could so openly discuss Kaiki-san's criminal history like this was because he had booked the entire first class.

He was like royalty.

"All you've done is openly discuss your history of drinking, you fifteen-year-old girl. Don't go around drinking *awamori* just because we'll be in Okinawa."[7]

"Hasn't the age of majority been lowered yet?"

"There's still some time until that happens, and it won't be lowered to fifteen, and even if it was lowered, the age for drinking and smoking will remain at twenty."

That corpse doll was pretty knowledgeable about the law.

Was it because she was surrounded by specialists operating illegally...? Perhaps she'd naturally picked up skills as a lawyer.

She was very capable.

"But even domestic airlines come with first class, huh... There are so many things I just don't know anything about."

"If anything, it's international airlines in which first class is starting to disappear... Thanks to the spread of lie-flat seats in business class—incidentally, how about you go ahead and explain your statement of, 'Iriomote Island was actually Taketomi Island,' without holding back? You've already been exposed as an idiot, but if you can at least demonstrate that Sengoku Nadeko is a learned idiot, there may yet be hope."

"That's not it. I read the guidebook, you see. I figured I'd do some of my own preparations. As I'm sure you know, it's my first time riding in a plane and my first time going to Okinawa."

While I was at it, I could say it was my first time riding in a monorail to Haneda Airport, too. Monorails sure were cool. To be honest, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that I'd already had my fill of the enjoyment I could gain from this trip.

Ideally, I would've preferred to go sightseeing in Tokyo. Though I did get to see Tokyo Tower from out the window.

"What an admirable attitude. When I see *oni* onii-chan next time, I'll have to teach him that it's the journey that matters, not the destination. Since he's one of those time-saving guys that only ever thinks about taking shortcuts."

"Surely that's not the only thing you'll need to talk to him about when you meet him next time?"

"Anyway, Sengoku. Why did you think that Iriomote Island was Taketomi Island? Personally, I would say that's almost on the same level as claiming that Sado Island is actually Shōdo Island."

The two of them were really making me out to be an idiot...

It wasn't good to treat people like idiots, even if they were idiots, according to the standard of the 21st century. Of course I knew the difference between Sado Island and Shōdo Island... Shōdo Island was the one in the Seto Inland Sea. Sado Island... Where was Sado, again? Sado... Was it in Kyushu Prefecture?

"According to the guidebook, addresses in Iriomote Island are listed as in the town of Taketomi. Then, doesn't it make sense that it should officially be considered Taketomi Island? Like how the official name of Iwo Jima is actually Iōtō, you know?"

"What a smart-alecky display of worthless knowledge. It's probably something you just learned from manga."

Don't correctly guess the source of my knowledge while sitting on my lap... Even though every seat, with each and every one of them being first class, was empty, why was this girl so insistent on staying on my lap...

She wasn't exactly light, you see. Because she was a corpse.

It was like carrying a body of flesh in my arms.

"If you're going to show off such knowledge, you should at least properly talk about Iwo Jima's history."

"Aren't you being too strict on a middle school student by telling them to talk about Iwo Jima's history?"

And the subject matter was pretty heavy.

Plus, on top of being a middle school student, I was also a dropout, as had been mentioned previously.

Originally, even when I'd still attended, my grades hadn't exactly been on the good side... I wasn't exactly the studious sort. Back in those days, "Gloomy girls have good

grades" was a prejudice I was always fighting.

"Iriomote Island's official name is Iriomote Island,"

said Kaiki-san, without an ounce of joy. He possessed a darkness that I hadn't even come close to back in the day—not to mention, he was far more of an intellectual than me.

Rather than an intellectual, he was a white-collar criminal.[8]

"The town of Taketomi comprises many different islands, including Iriomote Island. Of course, Taketomi Island itself is one of those islands. The nine inhabited islands of Taketomi, Iriomote, Hateruma, Hatoma, Yubu, Kuroshima, Kamiji, Shimoji, Kohama make up the town of Taketomi."

"Huh? Ishigaki Island isn't included?"

"Ishigaki Island is in the city of Ishigaki."

So it was a city.

As expected of an island with an airport.

"Even Yonaguni Island at the westernmost point of Japan has an airport. If you're going to assume that any place with an airport is going to be a metropolis, you're going to have trouble participating in society in the future."

He was taking a rather global view of my future prospects, this companion of mine—at that point, it felt like more of a burden than expectations.

But, was Yonaguni Island really the westernmost point of Japan?

As you may have guessed, I had never paid that much attention in geography class (neither recently nor in the past), so I couldn't say for sure, but I felt like that was wrong—

"Are you thinking of Okinotorishima? That's the southernmost uninhabited island... But is it even an island? It would probably sink if I landed on it. Since they reinforced it with concrete to preserve territorial rights."

"Is, is that even allowed?"

"Well, in that case, among the islands that are a part of the town of Taketomi, there's an island that's been reinforced with coral. Which one is it?"

It became a quiz.

Before that, it seemed quite heartless to treat an island of concrete and an island of coral the same... Were they even similar in substance? Er, maybe it was Yubu Island? Just randomly guessing.

"Wrong. To reveal the answer, it's Barasu Island.[9] Yubu Island is an island you can reach by riding water buffalo. It's not the same as Yufuin.[10] Like how Sado isn't the same as

Saga.[11] To think you don't even know that... You're really heading off to Okinawa without knowing a thing about Okinawa, aren't you?"

Well, I had nothing to say in response, but if you would allow me to provide an excuse, I had practically been taken along on this trip as though I'd been abducted. As far as this matter goes, I was completely a victim.

Please, let me play the victim.

After an undesirable visit to my hometown, I'd returned to my apartment that Gaen-san had referred me to, only to find a con man and a corpse doll lying in ambush... That situation was basically horror. And we'd left without a moment's delay.

I hadn't expected that the trunk that Ougi-san gifted me would come in handy so soon... However, when replacing its contents, the best I could do was messily cram some changes of clothes inside. If I'd been given at least a night to prepare, I could've put some more in—clothes into my trunk, and knowledge about the southern lands into my head.

...But, riding water buffaloes?

"It's a form of amusement made to help revitalize Yubu Island, which had once become uninhabited. It was thought up by an old couple that remained on the island. How magnificent. I'll take my hat off to them. Incidentally, the family name of that old couple was Iriomote."

"That just makes me panic! My surname is Sengoku, but compared to them, I'll go from a thousand to a hundred, and become Hyakkoku![12] At that rate, wouldn't it be better to refer to the nine islands as the town of Iriomote?"

"Don't say something so heartless. That's what actually makes you Hyakkoku. What would the town of Taketomi think if they heard that? Well, it's true that Iriomote Island is the second largest representative island in Okinawa."

Even bigger than Ishigaki Island and Miyako Island?

It made me panic even more.

Like *Gator Panic*![13]

"There won't be any gators there. Just saying."

"Isn't it up to me to decide whether or not they'll be there?"

"As if. How influential do you think you are?"

"You don't even have human rights."[14]

The attack from Kaiki-san was pretty strong.

I do have human rights, at least... Though I did quit being a human at one point.

"Then.... About Yakushima."

"……"

"No, wait, that's not in Okinawa Prefecture, right?"

"You're so suspicious. Nade*kou*, didn't you say you went to see the Remote Islands Koshien before?"[15]

Don't start bringing in context from the commentary tracks.

If you start mixing that in, we'll have DJ Nadeko, too.

"You seem like someone who'd say they're envious that Okinawan middle schoolers get one more day off."

"I wouldn't say that! So that's the kind of person you think I am… If anything, I'm usually on the receiving end of such inconsiderate words. Like, 'Not going to school for so long must be fun for you.'"

Though they should make the fifteenth of August into a public holiday, too. Rather than something like Marine Day. Especially since I was an inhabitant of a region that wasn't close to the ocean at all.

"Then, to test your knowledge, I'll keep giving you more quizzes about the remote islands of Okinawa. Question 2. From the following, choose an island belonging to Okinawa Prefecture. (1) Amami Ōshima. (2) Oki Islands. (3) Okinoerabu Island."

"Aren't you looking down on dropouts too much? I'm not Okinawa's specialty ice cream, 'Blue Seal'."[16]

"If you picked (1), because it's Amami Ōshima, I figured I'd get a taste of your sweet naivete."[17]

I was pretty curious to hear the variations in responses if I answered with (2) or (3)—likely, Okinoerabu Island was the real trap.

"I see. Because it's Okinoerabu Island, you were going to choose that island."[18]

"I don't want to have a pun showdown with you, using the names of islands."

"Question 3. Kerama Shotō National Park is actually in the Kyushu region. True or false?"

"Like I said, you're looking down on me too much! I already know that Kerama Shotō National Park is in Okinawa… It's on Tokashiki Island, right?"

"Wrong. Reason being, Okinawa Prefecture is a part of the Kyushu region in the first place."

"Is it fun to lay traps for middle school students?"

"In terms of fun, they say trips are enjoyable without any prior knowledge,"

said Kaiki-san, intervening.

Perhaps, as an adult, he simply couldn't stand to watch the chatter between two kids. Well, it really was an unsightly back-and-forth.

"And when you're on a trip, you should be seeking not knowledge, but experience. Otherwise, it'd be fine to just use your smartphone."

It may have seemed as though he was being nice and backing me up, but this man would cozy up to people and make them think he was "surprisingly a good person" before tricking them as soon as he saw an opportunity, so I couldn't let my guard down.

Rather than trick questions, it was those methods of his that I was trapped by, which led me to be pulled down from the status of godhood.

"If anything, we're lucky to be able to travel on the spur of the moment like this, without any preparation. In the past, you used to need a passport in order to go to Okinawa."

"See, you're trying to trick me again... There's no way there was a time where you needed a passport to be able to go to Okinawa."

"Nade*kou*. It's true that knowledge, or prior knowledge, may be unnecessary for enjoying a trip, but you should at least have common sense and etiquette."

Ononoki-chan admonished me with a blank expression and in her monotone, shaking her head lightly—did I say something wrong?

"Until Okinawa was returned to Japan in 1972, you really did need a passport."

"Really?"

Well, now that she'd mentioned the year 1972, I more or less had the idea... But really, during that time? It didn't feel like that at all... But if true, what I'd said certainly shouldn't have been said by someone on her way to Okinawa. I'd seriously turned into someone that might say that she was envious about having more days off.

I needed to do some serious soul-searching.

"But, isn't this partially your fault, too, Kaiki-san? You were clearly trying to get me to say something wrong. You set a trap in order to make me look like a fool. It's almost as evil as telling me to write out 'Peace Memorial Park' in kanji."[19]

"It's a lesson in the art of conversation. If you're aiming to be a specialist in the future, you'd do well to learn from this —to reveal one of my secrets."

If I learned that technique, it seemed like my destination

would not be a specialist, but a con man... Don't make me into the successor of a con man.

That wasn't the art of conversation, but the art of swindling.

"While we're at it, you should follow the channel for my online salon."

"Kaiki-san, you're holding an online salon? Are people really following it?"

"Yeah. I get a lot of promising young folks who want to become con men, and then I perform the good deed of ripping them off for money."

The ethics were a bit of a mess.

It was basically an Internet scam.

Thinking about how these first class seats were being paid for with such dirty money, I couldn't carelessly sink deep into my seat. I was lucky it wasn't a lie-flat seat. I suddenly felt the desire to do some squat exercises.

Like in *Slam Dunk*.

"It's not just limited to con men, but lots of criminals. Even if they were able to make a ton of money, it's often the case that they'll pass on without ever being able to spend it. Because even if they committed the perfect crime without leaving a shred of evidence, they'd arouse suspicion if they were to suddenly start spending money lavishly. So they'd live in run-down apartments in order to avoid being suspected, but it just makes me think, what was the point of making all that profit, then?"

So that thought process of his was expressed in the form of reserving the entire first class of this domestic flight... He'd said it wasn't just limited to con men, but it wasn't even limited to criminals—it was fairly common for those who earned money through respectable occupations (what was on my mind were mangaka) to let it all go to waste without being able to spend it well.

What exactly was the right way to spend money? You often hear that money management should be taught in education from an early age...

"But, going back to the topic of Okinotorishima and concrete, I'm surprised Japan was able to get it back."

"What a truly artless remark, said by someone truly worth educating,"

said the owner of the online salon in a depressing tone of voice—with a depressing and deceptive con man[20], a corpse doll that spoke in monotone, and a gloomy girl that muttered

everything she said to round out the trio, it really was a lineup lacking in any excitement.

Like we were going to a funeral or something.

In that sense, perhaps Kaiki-san's eccentric move in reserving the entire first class was the right move after all, so as to not get any victims involved in this funeral.

"From now on, after everything you say, add an asterisk noting, 'These are the words of a middle-school dropout,' Nade*kou*."

"That in itself sounds like something that should have a 'This is her own personal opinion'... The disclaimer needs a disclaimer of its own."

The asterisk was absolutely required and necessary.[21]

Well, I wouldn't have been able to tell that the asterisk was similar to the *kanji* for "necessary" without writing it out by hand...[22] I was bad at the liberal arts.

Though there was no subject I was good at.

Nor did I have an eye for subjects I was bad at.[23]

"That's for sure. In geography, you probably don't even know where Chile is."[24]

"I do at least know where Chile is... It's that country in South America that's really long horizontally, right?"

"You can't even tell horizontal from vertical, Nade*kou*? You must come from space."

"Of course I do. Because I live on Earth."

"It's the birthplace of chili sauce,"

Kaiki-san muttered. But rather than a con man's lie, it sounded more like an old man's bad pun... However, because of what happened earlier, I needed to hold myself back from retorting by reflex.

I couldn't know where he'd laid his traps.

The air was thick with tension.

"You probably don't even know how to write 'Sapporo'."

"I'd like to say that I can at least write that much, but I might not actually know."

Also, I was extremely doubtful of the right way to write "Hakodate".

If possible, I might only know how to correctly write "Tokachi".

"Nade*kou*, even though you haven't had a single victory from all these exchanges, it's pretty ironic that you know how to write 'Tokachi', for 'ten victories'."[25]

"It's not ironic or anything. You're just badmouthing me, there."

"Oh, I guess you've taken a point from me there. Well, Nade*kou*, considering the probability of you winning, it might actually be possible. If you spend your entire life, you might actually get ten victories."

The probability of me winning was way too low.

Regardless of my future, perhaps that really was the probability of me winning over the past fifteen years...

"Do you know how to write 'probability'?"

"If you're going to test me on *kanji* so thoroughly, my words will end up all *hiragana*... Though there was actually a time like that. But really, why do Hokkaido and Okinawa have such difficult-to-read place names?"

"Don't show your true colors so stupendously and dumbfoundingly with every step, as if peeling back the layers of an onion.[26] I'm more and more glad that I reserved the entire first class. Are you some kind of tourist that would only go to visit Hawaii and Waikiki?"

There had to be plenty of tourists that were like that.

Like how, in this world, there hadn't been only one of me.

There had been as many as five of me, you know?

"It's not as though Hokkaido and Okinawa solely consist of difficult-to-read place names... But I could even say, Sengoku, that your more-innocent-than-ignorant statements are really touching a nerve."

"What do you mean? Kaiki-san."

"If this were some sort of school trip, then as an adult, I should've taken you to somewhere like Shuri or Upopoy. When it comes to lands being returned or territorial waters, the scale is neither uniform nor absolute. That's the lesson you should learn here."

Upopoy, huh... If I had attended middle school normally and kept going onto high school (if possible), that definitely sounded like a symbolic site for ethnic harmony that I could have visited on a school trip.

"Asterisk. If you coordinate the timeline with Volume 1, Upopoy hasn't actually opened yet."

Ononoki-chan added a puzzling annotation.

Was that asterisk really required and necessary?

In that case, it seemed like now would be the time to head for Shuri Castle... On the Yui Rail. I wanted to ride on a monorail, you see. And yet, as an outlaw who'd largely strayed from the right path, the destination to which I was being linearly taken was none other than Iriomote Island.

But, it was neither for sightseeing nor a school trip.

It was for work.

I was continuously being scolded for going to Okinawa without any background knowledge, but if I were to refuse to go on this business trip, I would be left unable to pay my rent, living on my own at fifteen years of age.

It was really harsh. Both my life, and my working conditions.

There was nothing easy about being a dropout.

However, it was really upsetting to be treated as a bundle of ignorance. I, too, wanted to give them a glimpse of pedantic knowledge, like the movement which must have certainly existed before the age of the Internet—not about Okinawa as a whole, but about Iriomote Island.

"On Iriomote Island, there are going to be a lot of Iriomote cats, probably!"

"So that was the knowledge that you managed to squeeze out? You're like a genius that appears once every hundred years, Sengoku."

Such was Kaiki-san's listless response.

Come to think of it, considering he'd been made to look after a dropout by his direct senior, Gaen-san, it was pretty likely that Kaiki-san was far above me or Ononoki-chan in regards to being unwilling to go on this trip.

At an altitude even higher than this plane. An extremely high altitude.

In the first place, Kaiki-san had originally been cut off by Gaen-san because of me, so it must be a complicated feeling for him to be forced to do this to mend their relationship... Was it really because of me?

How complicated and mysterious.

The difficult thing was, an adult man like Kaiki-san probably wouldn't be pleased to hear that a kid like me was ruminating over those complicated and mysterious circumstances—it felt to me that the proper attitude of a child towards an adult was to be considerate by not being considerate.

Please be soothed by my natural innocence.

That may well be possible for the former Nadeko, but it was probably impossible for the current Nadeko. But still, there had to be some vestiges of a soothing nature left in me.

"Iriomote cats being discovered there is what made Iriomote Island into Iriomote Island, right! And not Taketomi Island!"

"As a result of squeezing out whatever knowledge she could, she was squeezed into an idiot."

Not a cat, but an idiot.

It wasn't necessarily because she spoke in a monotone, but Ononoki-chan's reply was also listless—perhaps I should've mentioned this earlier, but for Ononoki-chan, too, this was a trip for the sake of atonement.

Take a look at the eyepatch that covered the right eye of her cute corpse face—as a scandalous form of punishment, Gaen-san had confiscated one of her eyes.

It was an unthinkable penalty for the Reiwa era.

"Reiwa... Well, that's still fine. Considering the chronology with Volume 1,"

muttered Ononoki-chan.

Had this wrongdoer been tasked with the role of being time police?

Was she making up for the crime of changing history?

It seemed there was more drama with her than with me.

"If you fulfill your duty here, Ononoki-chan, will your eye be returned?"

"That's right. My field of vision is in your hands, Nade*kou*."

She was putting something pretty heavy in my hands...

To someone like me.

Forgetful as I was, I couldn't possibly forget the fact that I myself was making up for my wrongdoings, in a similar vein... I was in the middle of my atonement. Atonement for the wrongdoing of cursing and being cursed, reigning as the god of the town, and, after doing whatever I pleased, attempting to annihilate the person I liked...

"Don't worry too much about that. When you boil down everything that I and Yotsugi and you did wrong, it's all Araragi's fault, after all."

"I-isn't that boiling it down a little too much?"

That would result in green tea too bitter to drink.

"What, are you covering for him? A guy like that."

Weeell... I wasn't trying to cover for him, but it wouldn't exactly be a sign of growth to pin the blame on someone else. That was likely why Gaen-san was sending us to Okinawa. Instead of going herself, even though she was someone who was light on her feet.

"Hmph. You're probably right that Gaen-san's team composition was made with something along those lines in mind, but the core reason is probably something else."

"? What do you mean? Well, I figure this also serves as my training, but..."

"That's secondary, maybe even tertiary. This mission is clearly way too high-level to serve as training... For anyone, really. The extermination of Araundo should be a job for first-rate specialists—it's not really a job for a pariah like me or a heretical oddity like Yotsugi. And especially not a job for a rookie that's still learning."

Well, that was what I thought, too... That had *been* what I'd thought, but honestly, when depending on Kaiki-san not for his character but for his status as a professional specialist, it was an unnerving statement.

A professional shouldn't be saying the same things I was.

Even if you make such depressing complaints after coming this far... We're already aboard the plane, you know! And in first class, at that.

This is practically a scam!

At this rate, instead of focusing on my anxiety for the future, I would have to return the conversation to the topic of Iriomote cats... After all, people's minds will quickly calm down when talking about cute cats.

"It's amazing you can say something like that despite knowing about Hanekawa Tsubasa. I'm impressed."

Rather than reaching all the way to being impressed, Kaiki-san sounded appalled.

Before the end of this trip, I wanted to receive a true smile or true words of praise from Kaiki-san—I wanted to see a heartwarming conclusion.

That said, there hadn't actually been very many points of contact between me and Hanekawa-san.

It was partly because I was so shy and ran away using *takkyudo*...[27] Wasn't there actually not a single time we'd spoken properly? Even so, I'd heard rumors that she'd been possessed by a cat oddity... That wasn't the reason I'd run away using *takkyudo*, but apparently, she was a class representative with cat ears, or something.

"Is she as great of a person as how everyone talks about her? Couldn't it be that the rumors are preceding her, and if I tried hard enough, I might be able to beat her?"

"Sometimes, there's strength in not knowing."

The con man came out with an aphorism.

When spoken by a con man, it sounded even more like a lie—though it would basically be the same when spoken by a bundle of ignorance like me.

"I also think that's an overreaching statement for his position, but right now, it might be a reassuring statement. It's true that Hanekawa Tsubasa is a great person, and Black Hanekawa was a great oddity, but she isn't as capable as people think she is. Like her huge breasts, her power was too much for her to handle. If you look carefully, you'll see that she makes plenty of mistakes, too. And she was firmly rejected by *oni* onii-chan."

Really... Even though she was firmly rejected, she probably didn't end up with an incoherent broken heart like me... Perhaps the "firmly" part was what was important.

"No, no, she put up a decent fight, seriously. In regards to the situation of her heartbreak. In that respect, the slapdash reasoning of saying everything is *oni* onii-chan's responsibility isn't all that foolish."

If you look deeper, you could even say everything is the fault of the former Heartunderblade—said Ononoki-chan, referencing the young girl that was her rival. Hmm, was that meant to be some sort of callback to Volume 1 or something...? Even though it would be out of line to call back to Volume 1, from a chronological perspective.

It could be the special privilege of the time police.

"Besides, Sengoku. Iriomote cats are in a completely separate category from the domesticated cats like the one that settled in Hanekawa Tsubasa. They're even different from feral cats."

"Feral cats? As opposed to stray cats?"[28]

"To put it simply, stray cats need to be protected, but once you call them feral cats, you can exterminate them."

I would rather you didn't put it so simply...

There was a difference in meaning from the distinction between stray dogs and wild dogs, huh.[29]

It was a reality I would've liked to gloss over.

"But, Iriomote cats aren't feral cats? Surely they aren't kept in the Iriomote Zoo, right?"

"There's no such thing as the Iriomote Zoo—after all, Iriomote Island is a natural animal kingdom. Ninety percent of the island is jungle, you see."

So there were jungles even in Japan—I'd been thinking there were only jungle gyms.

"Once you experience an actual jungle, you'll find yourself thinking that that playground equipment doesn't live up to its name of 'jungle gym', Sengoku."

"What's with that pretense... Please don't threaten me,

Kaiki-san. There's no way I'll be experiencing an actual jungle, right? From what I can tell from your earlier retorts, it's not that it's called Iriomote Island because there are Iriomote cats there, but that because they're cats found on Iriomote Island's Iriomote Mountain, they're called Iriomote mountain cats, right?"[30]

"You're on the right track, but there's no such thing as Iriomote Mountain, either."

The mountain there is called Yaeyama, said Kaiki-san.

Was he unexpectedly the type of person to praise others so that they could grow, this guy...? Or was he actually the type of person to flatter others to deceive them later?

Yaeyama...

Speaking of which, there was also a group of islands called the Yaeyama Islands, according to the guidebook I perused. Or rather, skimmed through.

"In the first place, you should be dividing the words in a completely different way. Because they're mountain cats in Iriomote, they're Iriomote mountain cats—the ultimate endemic species found solely on Iriomote Island. They're neither domesticated cats nor feral cats nor stray cats, but mountain cats."

"? But, mountain cats are just stray cats that live on mountains, right? What's the difference between them and Hanekawa-san's cat?"[31]

"You really are a student worth teaching. What an incredible open-air classroom to hold, in an airplane, at that. Despite how I might come across, I did once strive to be a teacher, after all."

It was a lie that I did not even need to bother exposing.

A con man striving to be a teacher? Perhaps they were both experts in their fields, but the difference was just too big.[32]

"Kaiki onii-chan had once been taught by a brilliant private tutor, you see. Maybe he's not suited to being a teacher, but he might be suited to being a private tutor. And it's not that stray cats that live on mountains are mountain cats, but that mountain cats live on mountains because they're mountain cats, Nade*kou*. In this case, it's a naming battle, kind of like the chicken-or-egg question... But you can think of it as cats and mountain cats being completely different species. Without even using Black Hanekawa as an example, unlike stray cats or feral cats which basically coexist with humans, mountain cats are completely wild animals."

In terms of appearance, they're closer to tigers or leopards.

That was what Ononoki-chan said.

In a ruthless tone of voice, in spite of being in a monotone.

"Speaking of mountain cats... Is the Ball-as cat a mountain cat?"

"You mean Pallas's cat. Though its form certainly does look ball-like."[33]

That's also an endangered species, said Ononoki-chan before continuing.

"Hanekawa Tsubasa later gave birth to a tiger as well, but that was basically a tiger in a zoo. Bred in captivity by Hanekawa Tsubasa... Compared to that, Iriomote cats are the apex predators of Iriomote Island's ecosystem. They are not domesticated by anyone, and are not frightened of anything. They do not have any natural enemies."

It was different from what I imagined.

Because of the word "cat", I'd assumed they'd be cute... But they were wild, huh? Well, if ninety percent of the island was jungle, it made sense... So it was like the king of beasts within that particular area.

It was literally the king of the hill, in a good way.

"Because they're an endangered species, I'd had a strong impression that they needed to be protected, but they're apex predators?"

"Strictly speaking, the real apex is automobiles."

The natural enemies of mountain cats are humans.

So said Kaiki-san.

He did not seem like an animal-lover by any means, and his language was unforgiving.

"In other words, roadkill. That's why Iriomote Island has built tunnels for the mountain cats to use."

"Are, aren't they being treated a little too well?"

Did they have something like entrances exclusive to cats, like cat doors? Though that only worked for domesticated cats... It wasn't really my concern, but wouldn't they be unable to return to the wild after that?

"It's not really the same as feeding pigeons in the park. And it's different from the protection afforded to stray cats. Because, if they aren't protected, they'll go extinct... There are only about a hundred of them left, you know? Well, like you said, there's no denying that they're under protection because they're cats. On Iriomote Island, which is sometimes called the

Galapagos of the East, there are a lot more protected and rare species, but the Iriomote cat is by far the most well-known."

You just couldn't help but feel a bit of cynicism that, because they were the most famous, they were offered the most protection—though, of course, it was also true that they were most in the position to be over-hunted in the event of an emergency.

"Then, if I ever meet an Iriomote cat, I'll be sure to pet it gently."

"Absolutely do not do that, Sengoku. I'm not lying here, and I'm not trying to make light of you. This is a completely serious warning."

"Protection or not, the Iriomote cat could even eat a human if it were to encounter one."

"R-really? I thought humans were their natural enemies?"

"Well, if they're riding in cars... The inferior species known as humans would probably lose to even domesticated cats in a one-on-one fistfight."

I'd unexpectedly ended up being condescended upon by the corpse doll on a species level, but, well, of course she'd say that. Even if it was a one-on-one fistfight, wild animals still had their claws, after all.

Sure, humans also had fingernails, but those were nails that were meant to be clipped.

However, winning and losing was on a completely different level from eating or being eaten...

"We've spoken a lot on that subject in Volume 1, so let's not repeat all that again."

Ononoki-chan was showing some consideration. Though it wasn't consideration shown towards me, who didn't know anything about the circumstances of Volume 1... I was completely at the mercy of this time-paradox-like asymmetry of information.

"Someone like you probably wouldn't even win against a coconut crab. You'd end up with a finger cut off. Not to mention, it's outrageous to think about fighting against a protected species. If it seems like you're about to be eaten, you should just quietly allow yourself to be eaten."

Kaiki-san spoke like someone obsessed with cats to an unhealthy extent—was he actually a cat person, just pretending to hate pets?

It wasn't as though I disliked cats, though I wouldn't keep one myself. But even so, I didn't think that it was fine to

let myself be eaten by one.

"Even if it was a cat that was cute enough to eat up?"

"It'd be scary the moment they bared their fangs."

I'd heard that it wasn't just their fangs, and that cats even had pointed tongues to cut away at the flesh of their prey.

When I responded like that to Ononoki-chan's interjection...

"Well said, for a snake like you with fangs and a forked tongue—but there's no need to worry. Since they're an endangered species, it's extremely rare to actually run into one. They're like fantasy creatures that even an Iriomote Island native is unlikely to come across—in that sense, they're even rarer than oddities."

That was what Kaiki-san said.

Aha—though they also referred to vampires as endangered species.

"That topic was also already discussed in Volume 1."

"Aren't there too many NG words? It's too harsh for Volume 2, which is coming second. It feels like a test of my skill to make a lunch box with leftovers. ...Speaking of vampires, isn't there also a type of bat that's endemic to Iriomote Island?"

"There is, and while we're on the topic, a snake like you would be delighted to hear that there are also *habu* snakes."

Well, of course there would be those. Depending on the region, you could earn three thousand yen for catching one of those venomous snakes. I'd been stoked about the chance for a side job.

"Is it because it's an island like that, that Araundo Uroko... -san made it her base? Is she like a specialist that worships the *habu*?"

"You've finally managed to ask a constructive question, Sengoku,"

said Kaiki-san.

Though it was only a question I'd asked because of Kaiki-san's pretenses... Ononoki-chan talked me up as some sort of master of snake-catching, but none of the snakes I'd caught on the mountain in my hometown had been venomous.

"But, that's a bit troublesome. Araundo may be a snake charmer, but it's not necessarily the case that she'll only use *habu* snakes. Even snakes like the *mamushi* or the cobra might be used, even if they aren't venomous—but to get to the point, investigating the question of, 'Why did Araundo make Iriomote Island her stronghold?' is our primary objective."

"Eh, is that so?"

Was it okay to not defeat her? The evil boss.

I'd been totally gunning for that outcome, though.

Had I just been spinning my wheels, here?

"Of course, Gaen-senpai did order us to do that, but that was really just to mentally prepare us, so to speak. It's unlikely she's actually hoping for outlaws like us to come back with such extraordinary results. If anything, we're more like a reconnaissance squad, or a commando unit—it might be too much to say we're sacrificial pieces, but I don't think even that absurd senpai would think it would be so easy to settle things with her fated enemy, whom she's been up against for fifteen years."

An absurd senpai.

It was a description that suited her perfectly.

In the first place, you could say that me presumptuously taking up the position of a god for a short time was a result brought forth by Gaen-san's absurdity.

But, while hearing that was a bit of a let-down, it also made me feel as though a burden had been lifted—a sense of relief coming from, "of course it would be that way". It seemed there were limits even for the absurdity of that absurd senpai.

Though I'd been forced to gain a lot of experience recently, I was still an amateur, so it was like I would be going to stop the aforementioned Araundo with what was essentially a side job—but, fifteen years is pretty crazy.

"That means Gaen-san has been constantly up in arms with that snake pot since I was born. After finally tracking down her hideout, I guess Gaen-san is actually being careful by sending us to scout the place out first... Why did she make Iriomote Island her stronghold, huh? I really can't imagine why."

"In Okinawa, they have sacred places that they call *utaki*, you see. Kind of like the *heiau* you'd find in Hawaii... Maybe there's some correlation."

Since earlier, Ononoki-chan's been holding opinions on not just Okinawan culture, but also Hawaiian culture... Meanwhile, I couldn't tell the difference between a Hawaiian shirt and a *kariyushi* shirt.[34]

"I can't tell the difference, either. But I'd bet that Oshino can tell you a thing or two, as someone who wears brand-name Hawaiian shirts."

So it was brand-name, that dirty-looking... I mean, that lightly-dressed Hawaiian shirt?[35]

"Never thought you could correct 'dirty-looking' to 'lightly-dressed'. I've heard that *kariyushi* shirts can be formal wear in Okinawa just as Hawaiian shirts can be formal wear in Hawaii, so let's change into those at the airport when we arrive. And then the three of us can dance the hula."

"Isn't that just distinctive to Hawaii, and maybe also the city of Iwaki?"[36]

"Based on what I've read off the Internet, Hawaiian shirts may have originated from the Japanese kimono, or maybe not."

By ending her sentence ambiguously, Ononoki-chan was trying to gloss over the vagueness of her knowledge.

Hmm.

Since the only clothes I had were what I was wearing, I figured I'd buy some Uminchu T-shirts once we arrived,[37] but a *kariyushi* shirt wasn't a bad idea, either.

"You're like the epitome of an out-of-towner, thinking about changing into the local clothing as soon as you arrive. I would never do something so utterly embarrassing. There's also the sensitive issue of whether it's acceptable for an outsider tourist to wear traditional clothing with such impunity."

It seemed Kaiki-san did not easily get in the mood.

Well, it might be odd to even expect someone who wore what was basically mourning attire to first class... He was such a gloomy fellow that he might even be able to look directly at the sun, even without wearing sunglasses.

"Kaiki-san, if you withdrew from the battlefront as a result of cutting ties with Gaen-san midway... Has the Hawaiian-shirt Oshino-san been pursuing Araundo-san together with Gaen-san? Was he wearing that Hawaiian shirt as a clue or a stepping stone?"

"There won't be any forced foreshadowing like that... Oshino has had barely anything to do with Araundo. If that guy provides support to only Gaen-senpai, it'll go against his neutrality. This is practically the first time I've been involved, too. The only one who's been actively involved from a while back would be Kagenui, I guess... Right, Yotsugi?"

"That's right. Though in her case, onee-chan stuck her nose into those affairs without even being asked... So I do know a little about Araundo—after all, as long as an immortal oddity is the enemy, onee-chan will stick her nose into anything. She'll stick a hand down yer throat and make yer back teeth rattle, y'hear."

Wasn't that a super scary threat in the Kansai dialect?

My back teeth were rattling in fear, even without her needing to stick her hand down my throat.

"But, is Araundo-san actually an immortal oddity? Wasn't she a snake charmer—"

"Snake oddities are generally symbols of immortality, after all. The image of them shedding their skin gives off a strong impression. Even so, onee-chan was never able to get close to Araundo's true form—slithering snakes are really the worst matchup for onee-chan's straightforward fighting style."

"Mm... But, if she hasn't proactively mobilized the leading class of specialists, Gaen-san hasn't actually seriously squared off against Araundo-san, right? As the boss of the specialists, she didn't consider this an important job, and put it off for fifteen years—"

"It may not be an important job, but she attached a lot of importance to it. And she wasn't putting it off, but circumventing it. For personal reasons—it's not clear if we can be considered the leading class for Gaen-senpai, but Araundo has been like a lesion to Gaen-senpai."[38]

They've been fighting since you were born.

That was for certain, and it was a very pertinent way to say it.

So spoke Kaiki-san, quoting my words—though I didn't think my words were that significant to be worth quoting?

Since all that meant was that I was fifteen years old.

"Well, the timing of this being the fifteenth anniversary of their battle really might just be happenstance, but for Gaen-senpai, the fact that you're fifteen years old might have served as a form of inspiration. Otherwise, that chessmaster would not have played a trainee like you with the board in this state—because you're the same age as Araundo, she did a bit of projection."

"Projection?"

No, that wasn't it.

I was the same age as Araundo-san?

"Then... Araundo-san is fifteen years old?"

"I never said she wasn't."

Well, it may not be something that needed to be expressly noted... Perhaps that asterisk wasn't necessary or required, but it was surprising to learn nonetheless. After all, from what I'd heard and personally experienced of all the evil acts Araundo Uroko-san committed, it was extremely difficult

to picture her as the age of a child.

She was from Gaen-san's generation... Was probably not what I would say, but I figured she was from around Oshino-san, Kaiki-san, and Kagenui-san's generation... I wouldn't have been particularly surprised if she was an older person from the eighties, but a fifteen-year-old?

"Isn't fifteen the age where a child is most pure and innocent?"

"Wow, that's the funniest line you've said all day, Nade*kou*. You joker."

I hadn't intended it to be a joke, but, dear me, looking back on my life, just being a child wasn't a reason to not commit any misdeeds.

Without even needing to think about Tsukihi-chan or Nakuna-chan...

"The former advisor of the allies of justice known as the Fire Sisters, Araragi Tsukihi, has somehow naturally fallen into the category of an atrocious villain, eh... What a terrible descent into evil. Taking into account the dog, rather, the case of Tooboe Nakuna,[39] you may as well be birds of a feather. Well, for Gaen-san, perhaps she could have just as easily made use of Araragi Tsukihi, but that girl isn't someone that can be considered a mere fifteen-year-old. Besides, as someone who's temporarily been a snake god, though you may not necessarily meet the same conditions as Araundo the snake charmer, she definitely thinks you'll put up a good fight. In terms of conditions, you're better off than onee-chan, who can only go with simple violence."

Though I figured Kagenui-san had no conditions.

For her, there was no such thing as conditions or treaties.[40]

However, when I heard that I was mobilized against a fifteen-year-old because I myself was fifteen years old, it gave me mixed feelings... There were many reasons for why I'd become a dropout, but the primary factor of "because I couldn't get along with the others from my class" was a very, very big one.

Nevertheless, the reason I'd shut myself in my own apartment for over a year was, frankly speaking, because I was afraid of my classmates... And for each day I didn't attend school, that fear would double.

Everyone who was fourteen last year and had turned fifteen this year was so very, very frightening to me.

"So that's why, Nade*kou*, you're only capable of hanging

around tween girls like me and adults like Kaiki onii-chan. You've got a phobia of your own generation."

"Putting aside your phrasing, that might not be wrong."

"Well, it's not like Gaen-senpai is telling you to make friends and get along with Araundo... Since Gaen-senpai herself is someone who can make friends with anyone, she probably doesn't know how to show that form of parental love."

"Aw... Stop it, Kaiki-san. It's true that Gaen-san treats me well, but surely she doesn't think of me as her daughter."

And she probably wasn't at that age, Gaen-san... After all, she was the "onee-san that knew everything".

"Though she could consider me a younger sister with a big age gap..."

"Wouldn't that still be pretty unpleasant for you? You don't want to go back, right? To when you called *oni* onii-chan, 'Koyomi-onii-chan'."

I definitely didn't want to go back.

Thinking about it, he could be considered a witness to the fact that I'd been a kid that didn't enjoy playing with my peers as early as elementary school—however, showing no interest in my origins or psychological trauma, Kaiki-san continued.

"Don't misunderstand,"

he said, saying a line that sounded like it would come from a *tsundere*.

It weirdly suited him.

"When I said parental love, it wouldn't be directed at you. It would be parental love directed towards Araundo—after all, no matter how much hostility is between them, they're still mother and daughter. It's a different matter from dealing with a junior she's cut ties with."

"...Eh?"

Hostility—mother and daughter?

"Ah! You actually said 'hammock', didn't you?"[41]

"Why would I say 'hammock' here—this isn't some southern resort. Rather than 'SUP', I'd like to tell you, 'shut up'.[42] What, you haven't heard? Then I'll tell you for five hundred yen, but Araundo Uroko's real name is Gaen Uroko. The real daughter of Gaen Izuko."

During what I'd assumed to be mid-flight idle chatter, which would be referred to as *yuntaku* in the Okinawan dialect, an incredible bomb had been tossed in—what did he just say?

Araundo Uroko was Gaen-san's real daughter?

She was really her daughter?

"Wh—what in the world?"

"Five hundred yen."

"Here."

I paid the amount he asked for.

It was like the way Captain America paid up in the first Avengers film... Though it would've been better if there were a five hundred yen bill. But was it true that two thousand yen bills were still used in Okinawa?

It was something I wanted to see.

Those were bills from before I was born, after all.

Anyway, though it had nothing to do with me placing the five hundred yen coin in the palm of his hand, the con man totally had me in the palm of his hand—it was a small price to pay, hardly even amounting to sales tax, compared to the price of the first class seats, but as a school dropout supporting herself financially, it was a massive coin to part with.

Two thousand yen bills would be pretty hard for me to see in that sense, too.

But, if the conversation were to end here, it would be like leaving a snake only half-dead[43]—perhaps that information had been well-known by Kaiki-san and Ononoki-chan, who were part of the same organization, so they didn't see a need to explain it, but—

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeh?"

...On my lap, Ononoki-chan trembled. In a monotone. With a blank look. However, like less of a zombie and more of a catfish, she trembled.

With the fact that she was clinging onto me, she was like a machine that worked the abdominal muscles.

As though a hand had been stuck down her throat (I wasn't certain, but she'd probably had that done to her by Kagenui-san before), she was rattled.

"Ga, ga, ga, ga, Gaen-san's daughter? What the hell? I haven't heard that before..."

So it was possible for Ononoki-chan to be agitated, too.

Though we'd known each other for quite a while now, it

was the first time I was seeing that reaction from this corpse doll.

Because her expression was as blank as ever, it made her seem even more panicked.

"I don't think onee-chan knows, either... Don't sell information like that for five hundred yen, Kaiki onii-chan."

"Ah, but, maybe it's the usual?"

"Don't just call my lies 'the usual'. This is, in fact, the genuine 'truth'... And it's information that neither Kagenui nor Oshino know."

It's just by chance that I happen to know about it, said Kaiki-san.

By chance.

That part sounded like a lie, though.

"This is something that Yotsugi also knows, but I've known Gaen-senpai for just a tiny bit longer than Kagenui or Oshino, you see—well, rather than Gaen-senpai, it would be Gaen-senpai's older sister."

Gaen-senpai's older sister—Gaen Tooe-san, I believe. It was her maiden name, and she would later become Kanbaru-san's mother, Kanbaru Tooe-san—and if I remember correctly, she had already passed away.

But I was by no means completely unconnected to her.

She was someone who possessed that much influence, even in death—however.

"Eh, but, we talked about this earlier. Gaen-san isn't at that age, right? She's an 'onee-san', an older sister, so she never seemed like a mom—"

"She certainly doesn't seem like a mom. That's true. That's something she says herself—that she's not a mother at all."

I hadn't meant for what I said to carry such heavy implications. I was simply talking about her age... From my perspective as a middle schooler (though I was a dropout), of course she was a splendid adult, but still. Perhaps I could wrap my head around it if she had a child with a single-digit age, but she simply didn't seem like someone with a child of fifteen years.

"That's right, Kaiki onii-chan. Though it's true that, like Nade*kou* said, she's always dressed in fashion to make herself look younger than she really is."

"I didn't say that. Don't make me responsible for your words."

"It's possible that that crazy hip-hop fashion sense of

hers is a way of admonishing herself that she's unqualified to be a mother. As Sengoku guessed."

Everyone was pushing the responsibility of bad-mouthing Gaen-san onto me... How much were they afraid of her?

I'd thought it was a pretty candid organization, but perhaps it was surprisingly a group with a clear top-down hierarchy.

Dressing younger than she really was was actually an unconscious expression of her rejection of parenthood... Wasn't *that* actually forced foreshadowing? It was hard to agree with it, or even give any response at all.

The fact that she didn't seem like a mother...

Was because she herself was rejecting it?

"The result of being her own producer... But anyway, how old is Gaen-san exactly?"

The idea that it was bad manners to ask about a woman's age could ironically be more divisive in the age of gender equality, but even when taking her fashion out of the equation, Gaen-san still seemed pretty ageless.

That said, it would be a lie to say that Oshino-san or Kaiki-san or even Kagenui-san seemed more mature than my own parents or teachers.

"As far as I'm aware, all specialists look pretty young, as though they're immortal oddities," said Ononoki-chan. "Maybe because they're always playing with oddities, each and every one of them end up seeming ageless—I guess freelancing really is free of stress."

"That bias is like the primary cause of stress to freelancers, coming from a corpse doll... Kaiki-san, how old are you?"

"Fifty thousand yen."

Expensive!

Why was the disclosure fee for Kaiki-san's age more expensive than for Gaen-san's mysterious parent-child relationship? A hundred times more expensive, at that.

It was a first-class fee.

I'd been thinking that, if Kaiki-san's age came to light, I would be able to work out Gaen-senpai's age as well, with her being his upperclassman when they were in university...

My scheme failed.

Since you could attend university for up to four years... Perhaps she was up to three years older than Kaiki-san?

"You can't say that for sure. This is irrelevant to you,

considering you dropped out of middle school partway, but for the university we attended, it was possible to repeat years, for as much as eight years."

That was certainly a matter which I hoped would remain irrelevant to me... Then, was it okay to assume that she was up to seven years older? I think it was called the Fermi problem, the quiz where you tried to estimate how many piano tuners there were in Japan, so if I were to think in that way... If Kaiki-san was in the same year as Oshino-san and Kagenui-san (even if they didn't enter university immediately), he was probably around thirty, and taking the average of three and seven years to get five years and using that as a basis, could I assume Gaen-san's age was somewhere in the mid-thirties?

Mid-thirties...

Now that I was thinking about it, it wasn't completely impossible to see her that way... Though they weren't freelancers, it was possible for celebrities and athletes to look that young at the same age.

Beauty and health was not defined by numbers.

But, regardless of her age, it was still hard for me to see her as someone with a child. Especially a child who was fifteen years old—it wasn't a matter of her appearance, but her personality. It was hard to believe that the notorious Araundo-san was the same age as me, but even before that, it was harder to believe that she was Gaen-san's daughter.

"For one thing, that means there's a good chance she gave birth in her teens."

"My, my. Are you saying that's a bad thing?"

"No, of course there's nothing bad about that..."

Well, perhaps I was a bit too caught up by common sense... While I wouldn't go so far as to say that my own parents were like children that had had a child, it was true that they didn't really give off the feeling of being parents, either... What was it that made parents, parents, anyway?

What were parents?

As someone who'd failed at being a child, it was not something I could easily speak of.

"If we consider the possibility that she skipped grades, then we can't deny the possibility that she was the same age as you, at fifteen years old, when she became a mother. But there's nothing bad about that, either."

It wasn't bad, but it probably wasn't particularly recommended in present-day Japan.

...Had things been different, fifteen years ago?

“Values can change surprisingly quickly over a short period of time,”

said Ononoki-chan.

She’d stopped trembling at some point, but somehow, her arms wrapped around my torso seemed to be in a tighter hold than before. No need for a seat belt.

This corpse doll, who appeared to never be fazed by anything, had rescued me from crises time after time, but after hearing that her enemy was Gaen-san’s daughter, it seemed that even Ononoki-chan couldn’t keep herself from shuddering in fear.44

“But, it’s not actually like that, right? Kaiki onii-chan. When you say that Araundo Uroko is Gaen-san’s real daughter, you’re just saying that she just gives the impression of being her real daughter, and they’re not actually related by blood, right?”

She was trying to negotiate a reduction to her shock.

However, that suggestion was something I could get behind.

Why don’t I join in on that, too?

“Basically, it’s the parental love shown by an adult, and in the same way she sees me as her daughter, Gaen-san sees Araundo-san as a daughter, as well... Right, Kaiki onii-chan?”

“Who are you calling Kaiki onii-chan. I don’t want to hear that from you. And I don’t want to hear Yotsugi calling me that, either.”

Oops, I’d accidentally undergone a reversion.

Well, it wasn’t so far back to call it a reversion, but I’d gone back to the era where I’d been a little sister character—though, as I’d mentioned earlier, I was by no means a daughter character.

To repeat, Sengoku Nadeko had failed at being a child.

“There’s no way such a convenient explanation exists, but it’s likely true that Gaen-san is projecting her real daughter, Araundo, onto you—the both of you are snakes, after all, and you might surprisingly resemble each other.”

Well, I didn’t want to be compared to an evil boss.

But, we were linked by snakes...

Don’t tell me this would turn into a development where I would have to confront my inner self—it felt like “the last boss is actually yourself” had really been done to death with every possible pattern from every possible angle.

There was a limit to how often I could go on a journey of self-discovery.

"The last boss actually being your real parent is a development you often see in dramas and the like, but the opposite development of the last boss actually being your real child is something I don't think I've ever heard of... Good for you, Nade*kou*. In the future, you can make it into a manga."

"I don't think it'll be well-received..."

It seemed inevitable that it would be frowned upon.

However, the theme of a parent-child showdown had appeared in works as far back as Shakespeare's, and regardless of good or evil, the storylines tended to end with the parent being killed by their child.

In other words, parricide.

A story where a parent-child showdown ended with the parent being the winner was also something I didn't think I'd ever heard of—it didn't sound like it would be cathartic or interesting or even surprising. Really, who would ever want to see a parent kill their child?

"Well, it *is* something that's been seen in the natural world. A culture in which lions throw their cubs off cliffs—I wonder if a lion cub that managed to survive ever went and got revenge on their parent."

"If that's the case, I can see why Gaen-san wouldn't want to set out for Iriomote Island herself... She definitely wouldn't want her fated showdown to turn into a scripted loss."

Well, I wanted to believe that it was something other than her simply wanting to avoid facing her daughter after being estranged for so long... If this fifteen-year feud was the result of Gaen-san's child abandonment, it was really something I did not want to get involved in.

According to the principle of civil non-intervention.

Please apply the Civil Rehabilitation Law.

"In regards to that, I'd like to hear the thoughts of Hanekawa Tsubasa or Oikura Sodachi. The wise counsel of those wise counselors on the topic of neglect. Someone like *oni* onii-chan, who's been pampered by his parents, isn't allowed to take part."

"I've mostly been pampered by my parents, too..."

"In your case, it's more like you've been spoiled, Sengoku. And the backlash to that resulted in your independent spirit today... That should be an extremely good thing for your parents, too."

He was making it sound like he'd met my parents personally, this con man. The Sengoku couple was not yet at an

age where they could be considered elderly, but they would fall prey to a professional in the blink of an eye.

"But this is like the hardest level of parent-child relationships... Oh, so that's why we shouldn't actually be exterminating her. That's why we're just there to scout out her hideout... There's no way that, as a parent, Gaen-san actually wants her real daughter to be defeated by a band of rogues like us."

"I don't know if she's thinking as a parent. When Gaen-senpai doesn't consider herself a mother, it's not out of humility or self-deprecation, but because she's truly unqualified to be a mother... This fifteen-year feud is likely not based on any sentiments between parent and child, but rather based on a desire to clean up her past misbehavior."

You're better off thinking that she's lighting a fire under us by saying that we should just try and beat her daughter if we can—said Kaiki-san.

It would've been nice if we had a proper briefing session about this, rather than her trying to play it cool.

Instead of this tacit understanding between senior and junior.

After hinting at all these mysterious circumstances, it had gotten somewhat unclear as to what the actual conditions for completing the mission were—to begin with, it seemed to me that whatever the conditions were, they would be extremely difficult to achieve simply because the opponent was Gaen-san's real daughter.

"If you're that curious, you should go and ask Gaen-senpai herself. Try asking her in perfect harmony. 'I've heard that Araundo is your daughter, so what's the right way to deal with her?'"

"I can't just ask something like that!"

Scary, scary, scary. It was scary just imagining it.

I was cowering even more than Ononoki-chan.

For my current lifestyle as a school dropout, I was almost entirely reliant on that person both financially and psychologically, and even if not for that, I couldn't just bring up such a private matter so bluntly.

I found myself realizing the strength of not knowing.

In fact, I was desperately trying to think of a way to pretend that I didn't know that I'd ended up knowing something that I shouldn't know.

"How many times are you going to say 'that'?[45] Instead of switching clauses in your sentence, let's turn back at Naha

Airport and go home, Nade*kou*. When new information keeps being piled on one after another, that's nothing but the usual practices of fraud."

At Ononoki-chan's extremely tempting invite, I could not find within me the dignity necessary to immediately turn it down—however, indecisive as I was, if I were to consider that, by falling for that temptation, I could get away with not experiencing the developments that awaited me on that southern island with a harshness that would be no match for the minor errands I'd run as a trainee up until now, then perhaps what I should be regretting was not that I'd become a purveyor of superficial knowledge, but that I'd lost the mental weakness to immediately flee at the first sign of danger.

But even so, I couldn't go back now. Not to those days when I was just the cute Sengoku Nadeko.

Like how Gaen-san could not return to fifteen years ago.

Or perhaps, like how Araundo Uroko could not return to before she was born.

004

If you could only bring one thing with you to an uninhabited island, what would you bring? It was a pretty common psychology test, and as common as it was, one's personality could often be seen from what they answered.

A survival knife. You can feel their determination to survive. Their favorite book. Perhaps they're a bibliophile, but at the same time, you might say they want to avert their eyes from the reality of the disaster they're in. A smartphone. A very modern answer, but can a 5G signal even reach an uninhabited island? It sounds like a disaster in more ways than one. A change of clothes. They might be treating it like a vacation, but that would be pretty concerning. A family photo. It might be premature to conclude that such a person would easily get lonely, and you could say that their attitude of prioritizing their mental health makes them suited to being stranded on an uninhabited island. Cup noodles. In an instant, you can see they believe that to eat is to live. A lighter. Perhaps they want to enjoy the leisure of building a fire? A tent. They place a strong importance on the idea of having their own territory. A radio. The type of person that likes to have BGM for their actions? Just water. It's such a sound argument that it leaves me at a loss for words. A power generator. Do they want to become the god of the island? Sunscreen. Even in the midst of the beautiful natural world, they attach importance to their own beauty. Cardboard. They value its practical usage for organizing and packing. Their pet. Hopefully not as emergency rations. A strong rope. Not for the sake of hanging themselves, right? A harpoon. Gives off a safer impression than hunting. A net. Don't tell me, for insect collecting? A rucksack. I hear it has surprisingly many parts and is fairly versatile and practical. A *futon*. Are they the type to sleep it off whenever they're in trouble? Et cetera, et cetera—and for those people that go with a broad definition of "one thing" and pick their house or heavy machinery or a camping car or a boat, or even Doraemon, then let's just say that that's the kind of personality they have.

So.

My intention wasn't to ostentatiously boast about my human observation skills by only asking the question, so I will prepare my own answer. But before that, we must recognize that this psychology test, which may at first seem rather crude, is actually given under very kind conditions.

Indeed, this psychology test did not have any sort of trick question.

Because, for the sake of surviving in the environment of an uninhabited island, you are quite generously allowed to bring "one thing", one item, with you—but before I realized it, I'd arrived without even the clothes I'd been wearing.

On a sandy beach.

To the sound of the crashing waves, I opened my eyes.

Under the dazzling rays of the sun, I was stark naked—I'd made myself sound like quite the romanticist when I'd said that I'd opened my eyes to the sound of the crashing waves, but in reality, I'd opened my eyes to the pain of the ultraviolet rays damaging my skin.

I could really use some sunscreen right now!

That was the first thing I thought.

In terms of the season, we should have been right in the middle of winter, but the unforgiving rays of the sun made it feel like the middle of summer—it wasn't just dazzling, but blazing, and perhaps even fiery. Rather than being a fish on a cutting board, I was experiencing the feeling of being a fish in a frying pan. Or maybe in fish stew? My skin felt like it was boiling. Or being corroded by lye.

"Eh—huh? Ononoki-chan? Kaiki-san?"

When I immediately surveyed my surroundings, I was the only one on the beach, as far as I could see—since I was stark naked, it would've been a problem had someone been nearby, but of course, in this scenario, it was more of a problem that no one was nearby.

It would've been far more conventional for someone to be nearby.[46]

But neither on the beach, nor in the deep blue sea that extended out before me, nor in the thickly wooded mountains behind me, was there a trace of anybody. A scene of desolation as far as the eye could see—that described this perfectly.[47] I could only feel the sheer magnificence of Mother Nature—or perhaps, the only thing I felt was an overwhelming sense of loneliness.

"A—an uninhabited island?"

Strictly speaking, it was premature to conclude at this point that I was on an island at all—I'd only taken stock of the beach area, so what if I'd simply washed up at the Tottori Sand Dunes? As for what the difference was between sand dunes and a desert, I could think about that at another time—however, in actuality, whether or not this was an island was of little

importance.

Well, this being an island would be the worst-case scenario, but regardless of whether I'd landed on the largest continent on Earth or even the mythical lost continent of Mu, islands or continents didn't make much difference compared to the fact that it was "uninhabited".

Even the fact that I was stark naked was extremely trivial—as someone who'd already overcome numerous hardships, such as wearing a school swimsuit or wearing nothing but bloomers.

But hold on, I thought we'd decided that these sorts of things weren't going to happen anymore, with times being what they were...? Even though I'd heard that getting laughs from undressing a middle school girl was now a relic of the past.

How did things come to this?

It was different from what I'd been promised.

Had I actually washed up on a nudist beach...? Wasn't there one in France? Was I really in Europe? Or perhaps, for the crime of prattling on with limited knowledge about the remote islands of Okinawa to Ononoki-chan in the plane, this was my punishment? If the punishment was exile, it was much too strict for a remote island punishment.

—The plane.

That's right, I should've been aboard a plane—now I remembered. I should have been sitting in a first class seat that was far beyond my station, and partaking in a first class meal that I was completely unworthy of.

Who would've thought that such a proper meal, perfectly plated, could be served inside a moving airplane? I'd been left with such a deep sense of admiration that the serious conversation that we were having up until that moment had been completely blown away.

At the same time, I couldn't help but feel guilty, wondering if it was really okay for a middle schooler like me (though I was a dropout) to indulge in such extravagance—all the more so when considering that the money was sourced from one of Kaiki-san's scams.

"Don't fret. You should enjoy as much as you can, Nade*kou*. While you still can. The airline companies will end up in a particularly tough spot, so the economy will need to be spurred one way or another."

With a beaming face directed at the cup of Häagen-Dazs ice cream that had been served for dessert (just kidding—she

was expressionless), Ononoki-chan once again said something that sounded like she was looking into the future, and I could remember up to the point that I decided to follow her suggestion—well, even with my shoddy memory, I could remember a little further than that, but it was that I simply did not want to remember.

All of a sudden, the plane shook tremendously.

As though the shock of Gaen-san's secret parent-child relationship had caused the plane itself to shake.

I'd been averse to the idea of mentioning that I was scared of riding a plane for the first time in front of Kaiki-san and Ononoki-chan, and I'd say I'd done a pretty good job of acting like I was fine, but of course, I had not devoted myself to understanding how the aerodynamics of a jet plane allowed it to somehow fly in the sky.

Funnily enough, I'd even been under the impression that things would be fine since I was in first class—naturally, whether I was in first class or economy class or even the cargo hold, it would all end up the same if the airplane were to crash.

"We have received instructions from the pilot to temporarily suspend service. Please return to your seats and fasten your seat belts. Please be assured that the shaking will not affect the flight in any way."

The shaking was so violent that there was no way I'd feel reassured, so was it really not affecting the flight? But oxygen masks or something had fallen from overhead—was it really just turbulence?

Perhaps it wasn't accurate to say that they'd fallen from overhead—the plane had gone into a tailspin, with up and down and left and right being dizzyingly flipped. It was a real challenge to my spatial awareness abilities, like looking from outer space at the country of Chile in South America. It seemed like the oxygen masks had come up from below, or from the right, or from the left—and the hose seemed to twist like a snake.

Like a snake.

No, what actually twisted—what actually moaned was the entirety of the plane itself.[48]

Outside the window, I could see the creaking wings of the plane warp like a sugar sculpture—considering the angle, it was already bizarre that I was able to see the wings of the plane from my first class seat, which should be at the foremost of the plane, but it felt like there was enough force to distort spacetime itself and allow me to catch a glimpse of the plane's

tail.

If I had not fastened my seat belt as the in-flight announcement had instructed, or if I had still been in the middle of my meal regardless of my seat belt, I would have suffered a terrible tragedy. However, when Ononoki-chan released me from her sticky hold in order to return to her own seat and fasten her seat belt, that probably wasn't the correct move to make, considering what would occur soon after.

Either way, I would suffer a terrible tragedy.

Like a whirling dance.[49]

To think I'd be separated from the greatest bodyguard in this situation... Her carelessness had gone too far. Incidentally, after finishing his first class meal, Kaiki-san had put on an eye mask and fallen into a deep slumber... How in the world was he able to sleep so soundly in the midst of this turbulence!? On top of having the most vampire-like face, were you even living properly!?

In addition to the tailspin and the rolling, it felt like some vertical rotation had started to get mixed in, and it was then that my consciousness came to a halt... Rather than fainting out of fear, it was more likely to be blacking out from being shaken so roughly, something close to a concussion. It was unlikely that I would have been able to do anything had I managed to stay conscious, and probably all I would have done is throw up the food I'd gotten to enjoy, but the last thing I spotted outside the window was a tail.

Not the tail of the airplane.

It was the tail of a huge serpent that had coiled itself around the aircraft—that was my final memory, and the next thing I remembered was being washed up on an unfamiliar beach, in the nude, with nothing to block the rays of the sun beaming down on me.

According to what I'd been told by Kaiki-san before boarding (basically, it could very well have been false information), even economy class seats of domestic airlines, not just international airlines, allowed you to watch movies. And supposedly, if there were any scenes of airplanes crashing in those in-flight movies, it was fairly common for those scenes to be cleverly edited out—a show of thoughtfulness for the passengers, perhaps, but in much the same way, it was as though the scene of "what happened afterwards" had been cut from my memory.

If you could only bring one thing with you to an uninhabited island, what would you bring?

I'd ended up coming empty-handed.
It really showed off my human nature, didn't it?

005

Now hold on, out of all the documentaries about escaping from uninhabited islands, wasn't this the most extreme?—dropping me on this island empty-handed and naked.

It was a reality TV show that would never be approved in Japan.

Not to mention, I didn't even have any fellow competitors or allies... Right now, I was thinking from the bottom of my heart that anyone was fine, whether it was that con man or Tsukihi-chan or even Nakuna-chan. Aah, I should've been the one to cling firmly to Ononoki-chan... Were Ononoki-chan and Kaiki-san all right?

It would feel extremely wrong if I was the only one to survive while the two of them had not... Well, if I were to perform another Fermi estimate about what happened after I lost consciousness, then I could imagine that the warped airplane broke apart in midair, falling to pieces—it wouldn't have been strange if the plane had exploded, but if that was true, it would raise some serious doubts about my own survival.

I wasn't a ghost, right?

It wasn't the case that I hadn't realized I was dead, right?

In that case, if the plane did break apart in midair, then the pieces falling headlong into the ocean was just about the only way the passengers in an airplane crash would be able to survive—and after that, the clothes I'd worn especially for this trip must have been torn away by the waves, with even my socks and shoes being removed, and naturally, with no way of recovering the trunk I'd gotten from Ougi-san, I'd drifted onto this uninhabited island with nothing but my own body... If that was the case, then it was just as possible for Kaiki-san, Ononoki-chan, and the other passengers and crew members to have survived in a similar manner.

At least, I could only pray that it was possible.

Because if the tail of the massive serpent that I'd seen outside the window at the very end was not a hallucination born from a state of panic—that meant that it was not an accident, but the work of sabotage by a snake charmer to prevent the landing of the search-and-destroy unit sent by Gaen-san (namely, us) on Iriomote Island.

That meant that even ordinary people had gotten wrapped up in this mess.

Wrapped up, like a snake.

...I myself could basically still be considered an ordinary person, but now that things had come to this, the whereabouts of those two professionals had become all the more important... From experience, as Ononoki-chan was already a corpse, she may have only broken apart into pieces like the plane we were in, but I didn't think she was dead. Well, that wasn't necessarily a guarantee if she'd been sent to a watery grave—perhaps she'd become food for the fishes—but Kaiki-san made me more concerned... He'd been resting quite peacefully in spite of all that shaking, but what if he'd been laid to rest in peace forever...? No, thinking about it now, there was a chance even his sleeping was a ploy by the enemy.

Unfortunately, the enemy was one step, two steps, a thousand steps ahead of us.

Given that the source was a con man, the new information that our enemy was Gaen-san's daughter had been something I wanted to take with a grain of salt, but with what had just happened, it now had a certain credibility to it—but to think she wouldn't even let us get close to her hideout.

It seemed her style was to take the first move.

Conversely, it meant that Gaen-san's foresight in not making any movements herself had also been splendid... It had been spot-on to send the three of us out as a probe instead. This parent-child showdown must have already begun long ago, perhaps even fifteen years ago.

But weren't the pieces that she'd chosen to use in her first move a little unbelievable?

It was like she'd sacrificed both her rooks and a pawn for the sake of capturing the king.

So we seriously were sacrificial pieces, huh.

But at the same time, in a sense, it wasn't hard to say that the outlaw alliance of Kaiki-san, Ononoki-chan, and myself—Hypocrisy Co., Ltd., as Kaiki-san called it—had perfectly completed our assigned task at the very outset.

Our work was done, in two different meanings.

The enemy was on such high alert that just by getting close to Iriomote Island—in fact, we hadn't even gotten that close, as we hadn't even arrived at Naha for our transfer—the plane had been brought down.

Even the sky was her territory.

It was essentially a confirmation that Iriomote Island was in fact Araundo-san's stronghold, and after Gaen-san analyzed the way we were attacked, it would be possible for her

to regroup and mobilize the main force.

Perhaps she herself would set out for this.

We hadn't managed to ascertain why she'd made Iriomote Island her stronghold, let alone even attempted to exterminate her, but regardless, this result was outstanding even for us—and after having survived by the skin of my teeth, if I could report on the "massive serpent's tail" that I'd seen, then it would be a done deal.

But even so, where in the world was I?

According to Ononoki-chan, Okinawa Prefecture was dotted with tons of islands, but after thinking about the crazy trajectory that the aircraft had traced towards the end, it was hard to make the judgment that this island was in the Kyushu region... There was a chance I'd been blown away by air currents all the way to the Ogasawara Islands, and it was still possible that I'd floated to a different country entirely, like Taiwan or India (though probably not as far as Europe).

Basically, with a formal dismissal, I'd been joyously relieved of my duties, but my path forward seemed to have become darker than dusk. At the very least, I was sure that what I should be doing was not simply to get a nice, golden-brown tan on this sandy beach.

It was preposterous to go on vacation after completing a single job.

I needed to look for other survivors.

And I needed to send out an SOS signal—though I figured it would be too heavy of a task to attempt escaping from the island by building a raft, like what they did on those reality TV programs.

Never in my wildest dreams did I expect to be acting out the story of *Robinson Crusoe* (not that I'd ever read the book), but I wasn't about to stay put and allow myself to dry out in the sun—for now, it was time to look for some shade.

I was a little too late in that I'd already gotten sunburned, but regardless, I figured it was worth looking into the mountain forest as well. If I could find any apple trees, I would at least be able to discover gravity or fill my empty stomach... Er, let's go over things in order.

If I wanted to look for survivors, then first, I needed to survive.

What were the most important factors for survival on an uninhabited island?

Though *Robinson Crusoe* had been left unread, I was aware of various tidbits of information that I'd gleaned through

reading various manga... I needed to secure water, food, and fire.

And a safe place to sleep.

If possible, I wanted something to wear, too.

It clearly wasn't the time to be embarrassed about being stark naked, but I had the feeling it wasn't very safe to enter the forest with nothing but my own body...

I'd frequently made my way onto a mountain before, at one point to lift a curse and at one point to cast a curse, but not only that, I'd also made the summit of that mountain my place of residence for a short time. So I was well aware that bare skin was easy prey for nature, such as bug bites and leech bites. When taking into account the incredibly dangerous organisms known as bees, I should really be wearing full protective clothing, so the idea of going stark naked... Not to mention, if I were to trip over the root of a tree and fall, there'd be a huge difference in the damage received between being naked and wearing clothes.

I could get injured from the mere act of exploring.

I could get cuts from the leaves and branches of overgrown trees.

Perhaps I should be trying to put up with a couple of scratches on an occasion like this, but without any bandages or antiseptics here, even the smallest of injuries could prove to be deadly. Though I wasn't sure exactly what the symptoms were, I knew that the disease called tetanus was something extremely terrifying.

However... They may say that people can only afford manners when their basic needs of clothing and food are met,[50] but no matter what, it should be food that comes first. Like how they list the common fears as "earthquakes, thunder, fires, and fathers",[51] the correct order for basic needs should not be "clothing, food, shelter", but "food, shelter, clothing".[52]

While I'd been unconscious, the rays of the sun had harshly beaten down upon me, and my throat had grown rather parched, but there was no way I could simply drink the seawater as is... Right? Something about the osmotic pressure caused by the salt content... It would most likely just make me even thirstier, I think? Well, no, if all I did was boil it, then the most important component, the water, would end up evaporating, and only the salt would be left, right? And, thinking about hygiene, I shouldn't only boil the water, but also use some kind of filtration system... Oh dear.

I'd been trying to concentrate, but as a result of trying to

think about everything all at once, I'd exceeded the capacity of my brain. Because my head would always get full to the brim like this, I would end up being incapable of doing anything, or end up turning into a god, or stuff like that.

Around the point where the sandy beach underfoot started to become somewhat more earthy, I found a large leaf reminiscent of a southern country to use as shade and sat down using a craggy boulder as a chair—since the boulder had been in the shade, it fortunately hadn't heated up very much, and retained a temperature much like the heated seats of a winter train. Also, "a large leaf reminiscent of a southern country" was just my own personal opinion without any basis. It could just as well be a leaf from a northern country.

But, that was probably fine.

I just needed to take things step by step.

Even if this was a southern country, or even if I'd washed ashore on the island of Kauai in Hawaii, or even if this was Iceland, pinpointing my coordinates could be postponed until after I'd solved the matter of my clothes—even food wasn't a problem for now.

I wasn't sure for how long I'd been unconscious, but it felt to me as though it was immediately after I'd gotten to partake in that first class cuisine, so my stomach didn't feel too empty just yet. Since there was no chance of me regurgitating any of it from airsickness, either, I probably wouldn't feel any hunger for the next few hours.

In the meantime—I needed to secure water and fire.

In terms of survival skills, the process of sharpening a stone to make a knife would probably be indispensable later on, but if I performed such a fun-sounding recreational activity in advance, I would probably use up all my stamina and end up in a terrible state... Then, between water and fire, which of them did I need to prioritize?

Unlike Ononoki-chan's remote islands quiz, this was more of a death game where getting a single question wrong could directly lead to my death... But my instincts led me to think it was water. Humans could live up to three days without food, but they couldn't even last a whole day without water. At least, that was what I'd often heard, from sources other than just manga—therefore, I needed either a boiling device or a filtration device, as mentioned previously...

Filtration... I wouldn't be able to write the kanji for that word.

Because I didn't know how to build either of them, I

found myself briefly thinking that I should look it up on the Internet, but even if this island was within range of a 5G network, I was not in possession of the proper telecommunications equipment. By now, my smartphone had most likely sunk to the ocean floor, bestowing civilization to the deep-sea fish. I'd never thought of myself as being addicted to the Internet, but it was clear that I'd been completely poisoned by the information society, wasn't it?

It made me want to watch some videos on some streaming site for a change of pace.

Conversely, building a fire seemed only vaguely useful to my survival, and at the very least, I wasn't in any particular hurry to warm myself, to cook some food, to ward off wild animals, or to heat up a bath, so I could probably put it off until after I secured a source of water—to heat up a bath?

Oh, that's right. Whether it was seawater or spring water or dirty water, if I was going to sterilize it, I would need to boil it first. And that meant I needed to start a fire.

Haste makes waste.

Because water was the most important, it made it necessary to prepare fire first—it didn't immediately click for me how to build a filtration device (all I had was the faint image of a diagram with layers of rocks and sand), but when it came to starting a fire, there were several plans that were standard.

They were on the level of common sense.

I could put a stick up against a flat plank and rotate it with the palms of my hands in a drilling motion—perhaps because of my recent trauma, I could describe it as rotating the stick like how an aircraft enters into a tailspin. I didn't know what the official name for this method was, but it was a scene that often showed up in manga. But was this method of fire-starting really something that could be done with the arm strength of a middle school girl? And not just any middle school girl, but a middle school girl with slender arms who was bad at physical activity and liked staying indoors?

After digging a little deeper into my memory, I remembered the more advanced method of wrapping a rope around the stick (like a snake?) and then spinning the stick like a top, but with my intellect, I couldn't understand how such a mechanism would work.

I didn't even think I described it correctly just now.

If Hanekawa-san, famed for her extensive knowledge, had washed up on an uninhabited island like this, she probably wouldn't have any problems at all... I was tormenting myself

with an inferiority complex even in a place with no one around, but no, I couldn't start getting depressed here.

Or rather, it would be extremely idiotic of me to get depressed while stark naked on an uninhabited island—I had to remind myself, I was a person who had lived alone on a mountaintop for several months.

Well, at the time, I hadn't exactly been a person, but compared to the extreme tedium of that stretch of time, surviving on an uninhabited island for a few days would surely be a piece of cake!—it would only be a few days, right?

This wouldn't last any longer than seventy-two hours?

I wasn't going to end up like Nobita-kun when he ran away from home to an uninhabited island, surely?

Anyway, while I still had the energy to do so, which in other words meant before I got any more depressed and anxious than this, I began looking around for some tools to start a fire—and I was easily able to find a dry wooden stick.

But, as for the flat planks I would apply friction to, I couldn't find anything close no matter how much I looked.

"……?"

Ah, so that was it.

This wasn't some sort of hardware store where I could find planks on a shelf… There weren't any shelves to begin with, and a wooden plank was basically lumber that had already been processed.

Like the planks of a shelf.

In the Okinawa region, I was pretty sure there were trees with plank roots, or roots that were shaped like plants… But even if I were to recklessly head into the mountains and find a tree with such roots, I definitely didn't have the skill (or, at the current moment, a knife) needed to dig up those half-covered roots or cut them out.

Plus, unlike the dry stick I'd just picked up, a living tree was going to be somewhat damp, making it hard to start a fire with… But maybe that was just half-baked knowledge?

I remembered that, when it came to eucalyptus trees, they could start forest fires while they were still growing out of the ground because of their high oil content… They were dangerous trees that could produce conflagrations just from their leaves rubbing against each other due to a strong wind. At the same time, those trees were poisonous, so those cute koalas were taking on quite the risk by clinging onto them.

Eucalyptus…

Well, there didn't seem to be any of those trees here in

this forest.

I'd forgotten about this earlier, but the highest priority reason I needed to start a fire was for the important objective of emitting an SOS signal. Though, I had no intention to start a whole forest fire just for that purpose. That did seem like something Hanekawa-san would do... No, if it came down to it, maybe it was necessary to do something that audacious in order for help to arrive.

Preservation of nature was important, but I'd be mixing up my priorities if I died for the sake of preserving nature—there wasn't a need to allow myself to be eaten by Iriomote cats for the sake of their protection. Probably.

I was getting really tired of my own smallness, making me live with diffidence even on a deserted island—to think I'd be conscious of the public eye where no one was around. But here, there wasn't any strong person that I could curry favor with. It truly made me nostalgic for those days where I used to be Nakuna-chan's or Tsukihi-chan's underling.

Even now, I'd probably swear my allegiance to those two... If it were those two, they'd probably be able to start a fire in no time at all, somehow or other.

Tsukihi-chan's name had "fire" in it, after all.[53]

She could probably start fires just by getting mad.

Now, to come back from my escape from reality... While there was a stick, there were no planks, which left me stranded when it came to my plan of starting a fire using frictional heat... Saying that I was stranded was an unfortunate metaphor to use on an uninhabited island,[54] but rather than attempt to manufacture my own plank-like object somehow, it would probably be faster for me to attempt a different method.

In terms of "science experiments" that a fifteen-year-old could easily think of...

(1) Focusing light onto black paper using a magnifying glass.

(2) Striking flint for the ignition.

(3) Setting off sparks with a light bulb.

It was those three options, I suppose.

If this were actually Hawaii,

(4) Seeking out the crater of a volcano.

Would also be an option, but at this point, I didn't get any indication that I was on a volcanic island.

As such, while I didn't have a magnifying glass or black paper, if I could find some sort of natural alternatives for those, (1) seemed like the easiest method. If Ononoki-chan were here

with me, she'd probably scold me, saying that being so quick to go down the easy route is what made me Hyakkoku, but right now, preserving my stamina was important. Before that, if Ononoki-chan were here, we'd be able to escape in an instant with "Unlimited Rulebook".

I needed to do what I could do, of course while I still had my stamina and a full stomach, but also in terms of my mood, with my adrenaline pumping from the extraordinary nature of having washed up on an uninhabited island... There was no doubt that I would lose all motivation to do anything once I came to my senses.

Besides, even if I didn't take the easy route, and even if I'd found some dead wood in the shape of a board, I wouldn't have been able to start a fire through friction with my arm strength.

I'd probably be able to work something out even without black paper... But a magnifying glass, hmm.

If I'd been a glasses girl, I could've used my glasses as an alternative, so this was yet another difference I found between me and Hanekawa-san—or was Hanekawa-san no longer a glasses girl anymore? Was it possible to achieve the same result with contact lenses?

Since I wasn't a glasses girl myself, I wasn't too certain about this, but I recalled there being something about glasses having either convex or concave lenses... It really showed how shallow my relationship with Hanekawa-san was.

I didn't think that contact lenses could be used to start fires, but if there was anything that could be used as an alternative to glasses which were an alternative to a magnifying glass... Maybe... A goldfish bowl, perhaps?

This form of ignition, dependent on the concentration of the sun's rays, was something I'd heard of happening with goldfish bowls or snow globes placed by a window—it's much too ironic that water is what causes a fire to start in those cases, but for me, it would be very good news.

Because, while it wasn't drinkable, there was so much water right before my very eyes, so much that I could even sell it... However, there weren't any goldfish bowls. If there were any, I'd buy one for any price. Which now made me realize how my classmates were feeling when they let themselves be scammed by a con man... Surely, if you were someone in love with love, then you would normally find yourself with a feeling of longing on the level that I was feeling now.

However, even if there weren't any goldfish bowls, there

had to be some sea glass around here, right? After all, this was the sea.

I decided to postpone figuring out how I would turn sea glass into a magnifying glass for later, and I set forth my comfortable resting spot with an improvised sunroof to go beachcombing... If I were lucky, perhaps I might even find an actual magnifying glass that had washed ashore.

Of course, a lighter or matches would be even better.

Although, I was scared of matches, so those wouldn't work.

But perhaps it was wrong of me to adopt this wait-and-see (at the sea)[55] approach, as not only were there obviously no lighters or matches or magnifying glasses, but I was also unable to find a single piece of sea glass.

The only thing I gained from marching stark naked towards the shoreline was the feeling of being in some sort of avant-garde film, and I dejectedly returned to my original position under the leaves—I had only wasted my energy beneath the sun.

My motivation would easily drop with a simple setback like this.

Well, there was something I'd gained.

This felt like I was saying that I had bad news and bad news... While it may have been too lofty a goal to find sea glass in this situation, I'd been hoping that there might be anything useful that had washed ashore, but even that expectation had been betrayed.

Even though we lived in a world where the problem of microplastics was so controversial—couldn't there have been at least one or two plastic bottles that drifted ashore?

Or a wooden plank.

If some kind of plank that was nothing but marine debris had washed ashore, it would've been possible for the dead proposal of using frictional heat to be revived... However, as far as I'd steadily (and later, trudgingly) walked around, this beach was completely clean and free of debris.

It wasn't that I couldn't just find what I wanted.

There were no beach sandals or empty cans, no styrofoam or buoys or fishing gear, no bottles with messages inside, and not even any parts of the plane that had fallen apart—of course, it was fine for a beach to be clean, but for a beach to have absolutely no debris washed ashore seemed a little unusual to me.

To put it in a way that might sound misleading, a beach

was supposed to be the ultimate destination where marine debris ended up—any debris lighter than water would constantly be floating along with the waves, so it was probabilistically inevitable for the debris to end up drifting onto a sandy beach (as long as it didn't drift anywhere else) after weathering the stormy seas.

The mechanism behind trash littering a beach was not solely due to beachgoers' lack of manners, and part of the problem was in fact due to how this planet called Earth was structured—but despite all that, on this uninhabited island's beach, not a single man-made object could be seen.

As if the island had been surrounded by a barrier.

"....."

And so, the second bit of bad news was that, despite all that, it was a fact that I myself had drifted ashore onto this beach—and this wasn't meant to be some self-deprecating way of calling myself trash.

That was more like something Doujima Mayumi-san would say.

If there was something about the ocean currents that made it difficult for driftwood to end up at this cove, then it was quite the wonder how the disaster (I may as well call it an airplane crash) had thrown me like a sea cucumber all the way here.

Perhaps it was possible for a miracle like that to occur, but I was averse to simply accepting this as "it just happened to end up like this", even more than I was averse to the words, "just happened to be cute"—it was causing friction, so much so that it could even start a fire.

I wanted to search for other survivors as soon as possible once my most pressing agenda items were resolved, but at this point, the idea that I might be the only one here was not particularly reassuring—wasn't there something off about this island itself?

I'd been thinking that I'd miraculously survived by drifting onto one of the many uninhabited islands in the ocean, but what if—what if I'd been trapped inside this barrier?

What if I'd been sealed?

Such baseless delusions had sprung forth from within me. It was just the imagination of an aspiring mangaka running wild... But was it really okay to dismiss it in that way? Maybe it was paranoia stemming from a victim mentality?

If there was some strict regulation imposed on this island that prevented man-made objects from drifting ashore,

then it would explain why I was stark naked, though it was an unpleasant detail—if this were a manga, isn't it normal for there to be a rule that says, "clothes that are being worn are safe"?

If so, then if I had been a glasses girl, it would have been highly likely for my glasses to get lost amidst the waves, too... My eyesight was surprisingly good for someone who read manga and played video games all the time, but I guess I could thank my parents for that, though all they did was spoil me, according to Kaiki-san. Because eyesight is mostly hereditary.

Parents and children...

No, I needed to stop thinking about those things for now. About my relationship with my parents, of course, but also the mystery of why I couldn't find a single man-made object—whether or not there was a barrier was also a question that could be put on hold. There were no shelves in which I could shelve those ideas, but there was probably some reason that my ignorant self simply couldn't think of.

I had to take my meager reasoning and deductive skills and focus them onto a single point, as though concentrating the sun's rays.

I had to fire up my synapses.

Right now, I didn't have a choice but to abandon plan (1) of the various incendiary devices I'd thought of—meanwhile, something like plan (3) was so foolish that it couldn't even serve as the caricature of an idea. Expecting to use electricity in an environment with no man-made objects, especially in an era where LED was the norm... It was the same as making a plan to wait for lightning to strike.

Well, with how many sins I'd committed, it wouldn't be that surprising if I was suddenly struck by a bolt of lightning...

So my only path to take was plan (2) of using flint...

It was no longer a multiple-choice question.

It was now like a yes-no question.

What was the difference between flint and any other stone? If I broke the boulder I'd sat down on, would its pieces be able to start a fire...? From my vague recollections, flint was also called flintstone,[56] and was really a special kind of stone... In that case, I might as well be searching for the philosopher's stone.

It felt like the factors needed for survival were only getting stronger. While I was only getting weaker.

However, it wasn't as though the stone itself would burn, so I could imagine that any harder stone could be used as a

substitute. Basically, all I needed was to set off some sparks—so if I had some firewood that could be set alight by those sparks... Well, rather than firewood, wood chips from when a tree gets sawed down would be easier to burn... Right?

Not that I had a saw to begin with, but even if I couldn't fell a tree with brute force, I was pretty sure I could get my hands on some wood chips. What *could* I do, if I couldn't even do that much?

Ultimately, after thinking around in circles, my first plan of action had ended up with neither fire nor water, but the idea of making a stone knife, which I had previously dismissed as a mere recreational activity. It made me dizzy thinking about how shallow my initial armchair reasoning had been, but in any case, my life on this uninhabited island had turned the rudder in that direction—if there was no ship, then there wasn't a rudder to turn, but in order for me to not be shipwrecked any further, I needed to act.

If I failed, then I'd just have to make the most out of that failure.

I felt like I'd gone back to primitive days, but a primitive person would probably be more capable. I hadn't done enough to call myself primitive just yet.

When I went to look it up afterwards, I discovered that flint, or flintstone, was actually a form of quartz. It was a stone that was used as a component in the lighters that I would have liked to have, but in any case, it was a sturdy rock that would set off sparks when struck—or so they said. I wasn't some sort of rock maniac, so even if I'd had that knowledge at the time, there would have been no way for me to determine if the rock I happened to pick up was quartz or not... However, the important part was that it had nothing to do with the chemical formula of quartz, and there were no special substances within quartz that would undergo some chemical change when struck to cause a fire to start.

What mattered was the hardness.

In other words, as long as any two stones had some level of hardness, then in theory, they would set off sparks... The mechanism should not be so different from the frictional heat caused by rubbing wood together.

Theoretically, if those stones had a high iron content, then there should be a reasonably high probability of setting off sparks, like when swords clashed in a duel. If not, then far from "looking it up afterwards", there wouldn't be a future in store for me at all.

It would produce a time paradox, as Ononoki-chan would put it.

To start with the conclusion, I was able to succeed in using some random stones laying around to start a fire.

You might say something like, "There's no way it could be that convenient for you, you probably had some grill lighter hidden away somewhere, you staged survivalist," but in that case, instead of having me on this stage, you could try being here yourself.

Apologies. I ended up sounding a bit testy there, but if one were to repeat the arduous task of hitting stones together until the skin of their sunburned hands started to peel, even a timid school dropout like me could lose their temper.

The bad-tempered teenage years.

I could even become Anti-Nadeko.

I had felt like I was training to split rocks, which could be

called the king of royal roads in *shonen* manga—it reminded me of Cologne-chan.

I didn't say to split it. I said I wanted to see you *shatter* it.[57]

Something like that, right?

Just like how Hibiki Ryouga had trained to acquire the technique of the Breaking Point, I'd been repeatedly throwing rocks at the all-too-familiar boulder I'd used as a chair earlier, as though that boulder had become the enemy of my parents or even my parents themselves.

Well, the type of exercise and the amount of exercise I was doing was more like Hoshi Hyuuma, though.

My palms, once soft as paw pads, had become all calloused from pitching...[58]

But these broken stones would not go to waste.

Using a sharpened stone as a saw, I hacked away at the branches of a nearby fallen tree, diligently producing some wood chips... Rather than being a substitute for firewood, they would serve more as substitutes for rolled-up newspaper balls.

Then, after scattering enough of those on top of the boulder, I continued to throw more rocks—because I was having doubts about whether this would actually cause a fire to start, the physical labor was also taxing mentally, as well.

For example, if there were a gas leak in the science room... Then even dragging a chair against the floor carried the risk of causing an explosion, apparently. In extreme cases, even the simple act of wearing a wool sweater could end up becoming dynamite.

Because of static electricity.

If so, then there was no way this act of turning my arm into a pitching machine would prove to be fruitless... Or so I hoped.

Fortunately, I didn't have any experience playing baseball or softball, so I wasn't particular about using my dominant arm. Rather than a double-header, I was a switch-pitcher, using both my arms to the utmost efficiency.

Efficiency?

Or cost-effectiveness?

Well, I was able to assess that, because I was using all the muscles in my body, this had to be easier than the act of rotating a wooden stick, but every so often, the broken stones I'd thrown would ricochet back towards me, inflicting damage upon me.

Both physical and mental.

Perhaps you were expecting that, because this was a novel, the ridiculousness would be somewhat restrained, but please don't forget that, during the entire time I was performing my pitching practice, I was still completely naked.

If I had a Major League Training Brace,[59] I would still want to wear it, for the sake of protective gear.

When stone shards ricocheted back onto my naked (and on top of that, sunburned) body, coupled with the fact that such ricochets had been caused by myself, it was a level of damage that was hard to recover from.

Right now, I would probably open my heart to anyone if they were here to console me.

Maybe I should have prioritized making some clothes... Perhaps the basic needs being listed as "clothing, food, shelter" was the correct order, after all.

In terms of my priorities, after building a fire, I probably needed to prioritize disinfecting my wounds through the heat —fortunately, I had managed to spot a pillar of smoke rising from the wood chips before I could sustain any fatal injury capable of causing tetanus.

When I said that there was a pillar of smoke, well, sorry. That was a lie that I'd learned from Kaiki-san. It would be more precise to say it was "smoldering". If I stared at it, it seemed like there could be a few wisps of smoke, as though my eyes were just getting bleary, or some unidentifiable garbage had flown into my eyes...

This ended up exposing my foolishness, but I had not come up with a plan for what to do after the getting the tinder to start smoldering—as a result of focusing on dealing with what was right in front of me, I ended up being able to only deal with what was right in front of me. In other words, I had become so desperate to start a fire to the point of getting cuts across my entire body, but I hadn't thought of a way to keep the fire going.

If I had to devote myself to such hard labor to make even the faintest of fires every time, I would die of exhaustion before I died of starvation.

To think I'd die from overwork on an uninhabited island.

Even for a Japanese person, that went too far.

It was a black company in the sense that I would get burned out.[60]

Panicking, I leapt into the nearby brushwood in order to look for things to add to the smoldering tinder—at this point, I couldn't worry about the cuts on my body. I just needed to

watch my step, because there were a lot of stone shards scattered in the vicinity, as though glass had broken and its shards had flown everywhere.

Not only was I bare naked, I was also barefoot.

Who made such a mess, anyway? It was me.

In these circumstances, if I were to injure the soles of my feet, it could simply prove to be a fatal wound—so I quickly gathered dry leaves and dead branches from here and there and scattered them like firecrackers atop the smoldering boulder.

It was a party.

Although, if I had firecrackers, I wouldn't have had to do anything like this... In elementary school disaster drills, we'd only been taught how to evacuate in the event of a fire, but now I was being forced to improvise ways to get the fire to spread.

Foolish as I was for starting a fire without a plan, it made me a castaway that you might have already lost patience with, but it seemed that I hadn't run out of dumb luck just yet, because the materials to build a *kamado* stove were plentiful within reach, without needing to return to the brushwood again.

Needless to say, there were plenty of (supposed) flint pieces that had been used as balls for pitching practice just recently—the me of just a little while ago had done a pretty good job of scattering all of those.

Whether supposed or cremated,[61] the majority of the stones had been crushed, but several had retained a size that could be used as materials for the *kamado* stove, with a decent number of them having rolled around.

It's as they say, a rolling stone gathers no moss.

Stacking up those stones like lego blocks, I was able to finish constructing a small *kamado* stove—I might have been taking it too easy in this literal state of urgency,[62] but it reminded me of going on a field trip in elementary school and doing outdoor cooking.

I never thought that a field trip would be more useful than any of my classes.

I should have joined more of them, instead of skipping out.

The *kamado* stove ended up full of gaps and looked pretty unsteady, but I couldn't waste time on minor details during this emergency—and into that *kamado* stove, I tossed in a smoldering ember from on top of the boulder.

How, you ask? With my bare hands, of course.

My hands had become covered in blood blisters, with

skin peeling everywhere, sunburned to the point that perhaps they wouldn't even leave fingerprints anymore, and yet I grabbed hold of the fire with those hands. Not chestnuts in the fire, but the fire itself.

It was something that I could hardly recommend, and there was likely a more sensible option, but speed was of the utmost priority—perhaps it was a bit too literal in this case, but they often say you'll exhibit foolish power in the face of fire.[63] "In the face of fire" was literal, and "foolish power" was literal as well.

I was getting to learn the literal meanings, in a way that could not be felt by the words and letters themselves.

You could say that my hands had gotten so numb from pitching practice that I couldn't even feel much of the heat, but of course I was inflicted with a burn, which I disinfected with salt water after running all the way to the shoreline.

I believed in the power of salt.

It stung so badly that I let out a scream—it was practically a slapstick comedy by now. I'd gotten pretty busy acting out my own little monodrama.

Finally, as a result of sacrificing my hands, I'd acquired the most important item in this uninhabited island survival game, the item known as "fire"—saying that I'd sacrificed my hands was by no means an exaggeration, and perhaps this was what was the most literal. If there were forbidden actions that should not be performed by an aspiring mangaka, then I may as well have done ten or twenty or a hundred twenty of them.

A strict editor would probably reject a manuscript submitted by an applicant who did not value her hands so much—but, my hands would heal, right? Surely.

I would be fine, right? Baseball players did this level of training on a regular basis, after all. And training your fists by plunging them into the fire was kung fu training you often saw in fiction.

Thanks to the advancement of the digital era these days, in the worst-case scenario, I would still be able to draw with the help of an AI assistant... Ah, if only I had an AI assistant with me right now, I wouldn't have needed to use such an inefficient method to start a fire that was only the size of my pinky finger.

I would have just disassembled it to start a fire with its wires.

Either that, or use the AI to look up the best way to start a fire.

Even while seriously contemplating the further

advancement of digital art, I couldn't carelessly take a break just yet—to be honest, just because I'd accomplished one of my objectives, I wasn't particularly filled with a sense of accomplishment. All I wanted to do was go back home and go to sleep, but at the moment, I had no home or bed. And before anything else, I couldn't fall asleep just yet.

While my excitement was still high from this fire festival, I wanted to try and finish preparing the water, too. As you may have guessed, I was feeling extremely parched after this level of overwork.

Not just my throat, but my entire body.

I felt more like a desert than the beach itself.

I was so thirsty that I almost wanted to lick my own sweat, but that was an action I absolutely should not do by this point—though the concentration wasn't as high as in seawater, human sweat still had a high level of salt.

After fire, next was water.

This was also a method seen in *shonen* manga. I would take the royal road.

Now that I'd secured fire, making it possible for me to boil water, I would need to produce drinkable water before the sun set or I would be completely at a loss—there wasn't anything like a ceiling light here, after all.

In the first place, there wasn't even a ceiling. Nor was there electricity.

Sterilizing water by boiling it was the popular approach, and it certainly seemed like it would be lower in difficulty compared to constructing some sort of filtration device that I couldn't even visualize the blueprints of, but when it came to actually tackling the problem, I found it hard to get my body moving.

My willpower had waned.

In a flash.

I'd succeeded in stoking the fire in the *kamado* stove to a considerable size, but just as I'd thought at the very beginning, just as I'd poorly conceived at the very beginning, if I used this fire to boil seawater, all that would remain was natural salt.

To the currently dehydrated Nadeko, salt was a poisonous substance on the level of potassium cyanide. She was an eccentric creature that would die from licking her own sweat.

I so very much wanted to separate the salt from the water somehow, but if salt was all that remained, what part of it was sterilization, exactly?

Salt in itself might prove to be useful later down the line, but right now, I had to figure out how to remove it from the water... Um, before that, I needed some sort of container in order to boil the water, didn't I?

A beaker or a pot or a bottle or a can... Even a plastic bucket or an oil drum was fine. It would be great if such man-made objects could wash ashore, but there was no hope of finding such items on this island.

Just like the island's population, the number of man-made objects was zero.[64]

Looking at it like this, the usage of containers or storage was something entirely exclusive to humans, wasn't it... Then, could I make something out of clay? It would be progressing a little from the days of primitive humans, but earthenware wasn't so easily made... Becoming an ability user of "earth" alongside "fire" and "water" seemed like a very *shonen* manga-like theory, but I could imagine it required quite a lot of skill.

Apart from that, it seemed like it would be faster to look for a stone with a nice shape. If I could find something cup-shaped or bowl-shaped or kettle-shaped somewhere around here... It wasn't going to be that easy.

Though I'd been successful in making that *kamado* stove... Wait a minute?

Earlier, I'd used stones in place of balls for my pitching practice, but what about the boulder I'd used as the target, as well as a replacement for a chair?

They say faith will move mountains...[65] It wasn't as deep as I'd hoped, but as a result of my single-mindedly continuing to hit the rock with a large number of stones, the boulder's surface had become gouged out.

In other words, a crater.

It seemed that the boulder had been able to accumulate enough damage. Seeing my efforts take visible shape like this filled me with emotion in a similar way to the first time I'd completed a manuscript (I must have had pretty good control. I might've done well in baseball if I tried it), but more than anything else, it seemed like I might be able to store water in this cavity?

The rim was much too thick to think of it as a bowl, but if I could set this boulder on top of the *kamado* stove, then perhaps I could heat the whole thing up and use it as a stoneware plate...

"I see... I'm going to... Pick up this boulder... And carry it all the way over to the *kamado* stove I built..."

My elation vanished in an instant.

It surely wasn't that bad of an idea, but honestly, I was fed up by now—I didn't want to abuse my arms anymore when I was aspiring to be a mangaka, but I couldn't turn my back on my stomach, either.

If I were a smarter castaway, I could have used the principle of leverage or such tools as wheels or a pulley in order to move the boulder, but I had exhausted all parts of my brain capable of applying such physics. It was mental labor that I wouldn't want to perform even in peak condition. Therefore, instead of worrying about the minute details, I lifted the boulder with brute force and transported it totteringly to the *kamado* stove—even the idea of foolish power in the face of fire was about to run out of gas.

Depending on its weight, it would've probably made a better overall route to carry the boulder all the way to the shore, fill it with water, and then bring it to the *kamado* stove, but it wasn't at a weight that I could perform such a time-saving operation.

Therefore, in order to transport the seawater and fill up the stone container that I'd moved using my haggard body, I

ended up using my torn-up hands as a second container—the water kept leaking and spilling out midway, so it required three or four round trips in total.

It felt like I was torturing myself.

Now, after the initial delight from discovering the cavity in the boulder, I'd proceeded to perform actions one after another as I thought of them, but in the end, this would accomplish nothing but produce salt—what was I, some monopoly corporation?

Producing salt using a stoneware plate would be fine if I wanted to run a steakhouse.

However, there were some things you could only discover after you tried it, and when I set about boiling the water in the hopes that everything would work out somehow, I realized that this process could produce water after all—when the salt was left in the container, the evaporated water was essentially pure water, so all I needed to do was collect the water in its gaseous form.

In other words, catching the water vapor.

As someone who'd previously held fire in her hands, it shouldn't be hard to grab steam, too!

By using this method involving a fire, there probably wasn't a need for a filtration process afterwards... For example, if I could cover the *kamado* stove with a shopping bag or something similar—but there were no shopping bags that had washed up, either! If countermeasures against the microplastics problem were going to drive me to death, I couldn't help but feel a bit ashamed about it, but that probably wasn't the case here, seeing as no man-made substance, not just plastic, had drifted ashore.

Then... Something from nature that could be used in place of a plastic bag... Unlike a container, this seemed a little easier to prepare. Basically, all that was necessary was for the moisture in the air to condense, so there was no need for it to be that much like a container.

Taking that logic to its extremes, if there were a ceiling here, then water droplets would form, just like in a bathroom—then, could I just take a flattened rock and hold it over the *kamado* stove?

No, no.

Even a large leaf I'd used for shade should be enough.

However, even if it was just for temporary shelter, I was hesitant to make use of something that was already being used for shade, so I instead headed back into the brushwood and

pulled out an even larger leaf—this might as well be considered large-scale deforestation, but when I returned alive, I decided I could make up for it by refusing plastic bags when offered at the supermarket.

I held up the leaf that I'd snapped off over the *kamado* stove like an exhaust hood, in an attempt to obtain water—because this action was so similar to artificially making morning dew appear on plants, I felt like I was engaging in a very roundabout form of survival.

Roundabout—a detour.

Araundo Uroko...66

It had felt like I was finally confronting the reality in front of me, but even now, there were parts of reality I was still trying to escape from—by now, had Gaen-san started a search or dispatched a rescue team for me (and Kaiki-san and Ononoki-chan)? Or perhaps she'd decided it was the right time for her to prepare to enter Iriomote Island herself?

So as not to let our sacrifices go to waste.

Or, in a sense, without worrying about us in the slightest...

Because of my accumulated fatigue, and because of the sense of relief I got from doing everything I'd set out to do, the high level of excitement that came from drifting onto an uninhabited island had begun to lose its magic, and as I gradually regained my composure, I began to think that, maybe, it was actually better this way.

With no power left in me.

I'd been sent out on a direct confrontation against Araundo Uroko-san essentially to chip away at her defenses, so ending up as a castaway was still probably better than death. I may have been a snake god, but I had never been an immortal oddity, after all—it was a stroke of luck that I was alive, and it was a stroke of luck that I wasn't dead.

How was it for Araundo-san, then?

Since she was Gaen-san's real daughter, that had to mean that she was also human, so she probably wasn't an oddity, let alone immortal... But then again, it was true that Gaen-san was a bit removed from humanity.

The idea that specialists of oddities were beings close to oddities themselves was something that Ononoki-chan, who herself was an oddity, had idly mentioned.

Ending up not being present for the final showdown felt pretty apt for me, considering the events of last year—my drifting onto this uninhabited island was, most likely, because

continuing onwards was just not in the cards for me.

I'd assumed that the airplane had exploded in midair, throwing everyone on board in all directions, but what if I had been the only one to fall out from the emergency exit, and the plane had actually landed safely in the ocean? It wasn't impossible.

I would even hope that that was the case.

It was not entirely out of pure goodwill that I desired that, because if that was the case, there was a higher chance of Ononoki-chan or Kaiki-san finding me after being rescued themselves—but as I was thinking such things, the contents of the stone container I'd heated had completely evaporated.

I was now heating the vessel without anything inside it, but, well, it probably wasn't as dangerous as doing so in the kitchen... Or, could this boulder explode if it was heated too much?

Before filling up the crater again with more seawater, I first needed to verify the results of my plan—it wasn't about if I'd managed to produce any salt... It worked! On the underside of the leaf I'd used as an exhaust hood, there were droplets of water clinging to it, even more than I'd expected.

I unabashedly licked up the water, my tongue darting in and out like a snake's.

Thinking about it, even if the seawater had been sterilized by boiling, I had not paid attention to the sterilization of the leaf, there were still some hygiene concerns—but it should have gotten heated up by the water vapor to some extent, so I just had to believe that it wasn't anything to worry about.

What I *did* need to worry about was my dried-up self.

Even though I hadn't shed my skin, it ended up feeling like snakeskin, meant to be stowed away in a wallet.[67] The title of this novel could become *Hoshimonogatari*—"Dried Tale".[68]

Ultimately, for the sake of hydrating myself, I ended up trying to lick up the moisture from the leaf's veins themselves (though if that was enough, I could've done that from the beginning), but for now, I had just barely managed to moisten my parched throat—I had not nearly drunk as much as I wanted, but I had managed to escape the danger of heatstroke.

I couldn't shed my skin, but I could shed off that danger.[69]

If I repeated this, then water was more or less secured—no, this was nothing but a stopgap measure, and if I had to perform this much hard labor in order to obtain such a tiny

amount of water, the cost-effectiveness was really poor.

Or rather, my intelligence was really poor.

The foolish power in the face of fire was essentially just an emergency power supply, and it couldn't last forever—perhaps I could handle it if it were once a week, but there was no way I'd be able to do it every hour of every day.

Like the cavity in the boulder, the damage done to my own body would accumulate, too.

Thinking in the long-term, I would probably have to look for a watering place for non-emergency use... But for today, this was the best I could do.

It was a pretty big achievement to not have died on the first day—in the time it took for me to produce about enough water to fill up a *sake* cup, the sun that had completely cooked my skin had long since set, and the island had entered into the time known as night.

The senses of the human body truly were arbitrary, making me suddenly feel chilly only after realizing that it had become night, but it wasn't that I didn't notice the sun setting just because I was so absorbed in the process of producing water.

It was also because the starlight that poured down from the ceilingless night sky was much too radiant—to the extent that I probably didn't even need to work so eagerly to finish everything before evening.

It felt almost as though I could be sunburned by the starlight, but I couldn't help but unconsciously step out from under my shade, as though being lured by the stars—if I were an astronomer, I might have been able to derive the coordinates of this uninhabited island by the positions of the stars, which shone more distinctly than in a planetarium, but alas, the only constellations I knew were Orion and the Big Dipper.

The W-shaped one was Cassiopeia? Was that right?

However, despite my ignorant and unlearned nature, I was still capable of concluding that this island had to indeed still be somewhere within the Okinawa region—because, when we were still aboard the plane, Ononoki-chan had said this.

Taketomi Island, the island that I'd mistaken for Iriomote Island, was the only place in the country whose starry sky was under protection—if Iriomote Island had Iriomote cats, then Taketomi Island had its starry sky, so to speak.

If so, and if I could view such a breathtaking starry sky from here, then it surely wasn't an astronomical observation born from wishful thinking to conclude that this island was

somewhere near Taketomi Island—I couldn't see any landmasses on the horizon from my current position, but on the other side of the island, I might even be able to see Taketomi Island or even Iriomote Island in the distance...

I wasn't in the mood to travel such a large distance at the moment, though. And before that, I certainly didn't have the energy to build a house or search for food or make some pajamas.

However, as I bathed with my naked body in the starlight pouring down from the cloudless night sky, I felt like my energy was being recharged to full—damage wasn't the only thing I was accumulating. Even if I were to sleep using a rock as a pillow, I probably didn't need to worry about never being able to wake up again.

Despite there not being any shelves, I was fully aware that I had shelved a great many things, but for once, I wanted to be versatile and allow me, Sengoku Nadeko, to get some rest. There may not be anything more improper than this, but sleeping while stark naked in the embrace of Mother Nature was an experience that all human beings surely wanted to have at least once in their lives.

Good night.

Sleep well, and sweet dreams.

My water shortage problem was abruptly resolved.

Through none of my own assiduous efforts.

I couldn't help but wish that water shortages across the world could be resolved in such a way—but as I lay fast asleep underneath the stars, my whole body was hit with the sensation of being pricked by a thousand needles.

The shock made me feel as though my body was about to become riddled with holes like Nakuna-chan had been, but after the dazzling downpour of starlight, it was not a downpour of pincushions or hedgehogs that followed.

What came pouring down was just normal rain.

No, it wasn't normal. It was a torrent of rain.

Had my laborious actions, which I had performed while stark naked, been mistaken by the heavens as a prayer for rain? The rainfall, which reminded me of taking a shower before entering a swimming pool, made me rush for shelter—not beneath the eaves, but beneath the leaves.[70]

And, with the rain coming down in buckets, I once again confirmed that this was within the Okinawa region—this had to be one of those subtropical squalls that I'd heard so much about!

It was not a blessed rain from the heavens in response to my prayer for rain or out of pity for me being stranded on this island, but a perfectly normal weather phenomenon in the form of a guerrilla rainstorm... It was practically meaningless to take shelter under the leaves, and my thirst was quenched in an instant.

Like something dried-up being rehydrated.

I could think of several reasons why rainwater should not be drunk directly, but even with my mouth closed tight, the water seemed to force its way between my lips. And even though the rain was so heavy that, at its peak, it formed a water screen that kept me from seeing barely an inch in front of me, it soon stopped—this was also a characteristic of squalls.

They would come down with a roar, and then disappear in a flash.

If only it had rained just a little longer, then I could have collected some of the rainwater in plastic bottles—was not the sort of selfishness I could express. Because not a single plastic bottle had drifted onto this island.

The "fire", which I had worked so hard to secure, had

naturally been put out by the torrent of rain, much like a fire extinguisher would have done (which meant there was no chance of me boiling the rainwater, either), so in terms of my gains and losses, I'd say I pretty much broke even.

Therefore, I'd begun to seriously worry about crafting a proper container as soon as possible for the next time there was a sudden rainfall... But to start with the conclusion, I would soon learn that there was no need to trouble myself with crafting any containers—because heavy downpours that were just as sudden, or even more sudden than before, began to fall on a daily basis without pause.

Here, it rains thirty-five days a month—was a saying not from Okinawa, but from the island of Yakushima in Kagoshima Prefecture, but here on this uninhabited island, it felt like an infinite sandwich of scorching sunlight and guerrilla rainstorms.

With this, there wouldn't be any need to work so primitively or act like some *yokai* that licked the undersides of leaves—since boiling water wasn't the sole purpose of acquiring fire, my new challenge was to rack my brains and think of a way to build a *kamado* stove that wouldn't go out in the rain, but overall, the constant squalls had made my chance of survival rise rapidly.

Okinawa was the best! I was definitely going to live here in the future.

Well, if things kept up like this, there was a considerable risk of that coming true, but not in the way I wanted it to—as you may have guessed, the fact that I was able to recognize the frequency of these squalls meant that my life on this uninhabited island had become prolonged.

At this point, it was no longer a short stay.

Like a prisoner, I'd been laying out one rock on the ground every day, and counting them revealed that already fourteen days had passed since I'd washed ashore.

Already two weeks.

Though more than seventy-two hours had passed, I was still alive, huh.

But at the same time, this was also the number of days that had passed without any sign of rescue, even in spite of the stones I'd arranged in the shape of an SOS, as well as the number of the days that have passed without encountering any other survivors—though I'd been pulling through somehow, the circumstances seemed to be taking a turn for the worse.

It was a war of attrition, with me on a gradual decline.

Of course, unlike the abilities of a *shonen* manga protagonist, I couldn't survive on an uninhabited island with just "fire" and "water". Though it's rather simplified, allow me to give a brief but informative digest of how I managed to messily survive through two weeks of sunshine and torrential rains.

The problem of water was resolved. (How lucky I was to drift onto an island with lots of rain!) The fire may have fizzled from the blessings of heaven, but since I had already succeeded once, it would be possible for me to be rewarded with the same stroke of luck, as long as I put in the same amount of effort—though it wasn't exactly the same.

Because the conditions for ignition had become even more strict, now that the wood chips and rock faces were damp from the squalls... There wasn't anything more strict than this.

It was as if the strictness had been further constricted.[71]

However, there was an obvious solution to the dampness problem, which was to dry out the ignition equipment in the sun during the periods of scorching heat. I hadn't changed my character into a tanned girl just for show, you see.

The paradox of it raining thirty-five days a month on Yakushima could be explained by the fact that squalls didn't last for an entire day—logically speaking, it made sense to say "It rains thirty-five times a month," and moreover, if the saying went, "It rains thirty-five hours a month," that could easily be the case even on the Honshu mainland.

Never before had I ever hung up my laundry to dry (even when I'd started living alone, I used a dryer out of laziness), so who would have guessed that I would be trying to aim for periods of sunshine in order to dry wood and stones... Life could truly be mysterious.

Even more mysterious than oddities.

And with that, though I couldn't say that the matter of fire was completely resolved (if possible, I wanted to come up with a more efficient way of lighting a fire, as well as a sturdier *kamado* stove that wouldn't leak in the rain), it was now possible for me to postpone my renovations for the future—and thus, the next problem I needed to confront was the problem of food.

The problem of food, or rather, the problem of starvation.

As I understood it, this was also a problem that was being confronted by organizations such as the WHO... The luxury of the first class meal, which I had eaten to my heart's

content, had quickly been used up due to a combination of overworking and the fact that it was currently my growth period.

My vitality had been completely depleted.

You could even say that my vitality had been uprooted.[72]

I needed to figure something out before my hunger got any worse, or I would probably find myself eating the sand from the beach out of desperation. But the act of looking for food felt as dry as sand.[73] I'd been hoping that I would conveniently discover trees with apples growing, or, because we were in the south, pineapples or coconuts, but a shallow search of the nearby brushwood failed to turn up any kind of fruit that I could serve for a meal.

It wasn't that there weren't any trees bearing fruits at all, but it was impossible for my untrained eyes to judge whether those fruits were edible or not—I didn't have a basis for this, but I had a feeling that upsetting my stomach was basically a death flag on an uninhabited island.

There would be too much internal damage.

I figured the chances of finding the fruits I desired would rise if I were to trek deeper into the woods, but I still wasn't convinced at the idea of diving into a forest while naked... I had extremely strong feelings about going any deeper until I could get some protective clothing custom-made.

And if that was the case, then I had no option but to seek materials from the opposite of the mountain slopes—the ocean.

In other words, seafood.

I couldn't deny that the process of preparing fish seemed more intimidating to me than simply plucking apples off their trees, but it was for the sake of my survival. And, as someone with the prior offense of having chopped up a large number of snakes without even intending to eat them, I was sure I could muster up the courage when it came down to it.

However, the question was if I would even be able to arrive at that immoral-sounding cooking step... Because I didn't have any experience in fishing. I'd never even touched fishing equipment before, and before that, there were no fishing rods for me to use on this island.

In survival programs, it's usually a given that there's some sort of string among the flotsam that washes ashore, but as long as I couldn't expect to find any man-made items, I would have no choice but to try and make something out of branches and ivy... It really was tough to try and construct a

fishing rod when I had never seen or touched one before.

And I didn't have any bait, either.

If I did, I would be eating it myself.

In that case, the better option would be to use a more direct tool for fishing, the harpoon—not that I'd seen or touched one of those, either, but it was easier to picture because of its simple structure.

It was basically a spear, right?

For the tip, it was probably enough to reuse one of the many broken stones I had mass-produced for the sake of lighting a fire, and if I tied one around a branch, it could more or less be called a harpoon.

When I finished making it, it ended up looking more like a spear than I'd expected, but what was the difference between a spear and a harpoon, anyway? Regardless, it was finally time for the bowline knot that I'd learned from manga to come in handy—the end result was a little too heavy for my weak arms, but because buoyancy would come into play in the water, it probably wouldn't pose too much of a problem.

What could actually pose a problem was the fact that I couldn't swim.

There were various levels to being unable to swim, but in my case, I couldn't even swim a meter's distance... People capable of swimming really shouldn't underestimate how incapable of swimming some people were. However, humans were certainly capable of floating in the water, which was how I was able to drift onto this island in the first place. And it seemed to me that the reason that I could not swim a distance that was shorter than my height was not because I was incapable of swimming, but rather because I didn't feel like swimming and didn't want to swim, if I did say so myself.

However, as I'd said many times before, my life was on the line here. I had to become my own lifeguard.

This was no swimming school.

Was it really reasonable for me to not enter the ocean, simply because I was afraid? Perhaps I could actually swim very well once I actually tried? Maybe I would awaken a hidden talent of mine, like with pitching.

There was once a time that I had worn a school swimsuit as a uniform, after all.

And in that way, my thoughts began to shift in an optimistic direction. Even so, I was still someone who valued her self-preservation extremely highly, so I began putting all my efforts into the production of a safety apparatus.

Working more precisely, more carefully, more soulfully, I constructed a safety rope... After twisting many strands of ivy into a long, long rope, I tied one end of it to my torso and the other to a massive tree that seemed like it wouldn't fall over no matter how strong a typhoon there was, a tree that I could never hope to wrap my arms around.

It would've been the pinnacle of safety if I'd been able to make a swim ring and a kick board, but of course, even plastic bags and styrofoam were flotation tools made by human hands... If I were to search deep in the forest, I likely would have found trees that could provide materials to help me float more easily, but there was an order to things.

I wanted to make avoiding injury my number one priority.

Though that might not sound very convincing, considering how worn-out my hands were.

Of course, in order to prevent the stupid development of the safety rope tangling around my legs and making me drown, I took great care to ensure there was enough slack before making my way into the ocean—it would make sense to think that I should've tested it a little more carefully, but when I thought about the possibility that I wouldn't be able to see a single fish in this part of the ocean, I figured it would be better if I could confirm that as soon as possible.

In this situation, I wanted to avoid unnecessary work.

After all, this was a beach where no man-made objects would drift ashore, so it wouldn't be too incredible for some sort of supernatural phenomenon to prevent even the intrusion of living beings—rather, something incredible on that level was perfectly capable of happening.

And in that respect, there'd been a time where I had more or less been something that wasn't a living being... But regardless, it was a needless worry, if my eyes weren't deceiving me when I went underwater, for I could make out the shapes of quite a lot of fish.

It was also good news that I didn't struggle as much in the water as I'd feared.

Perhaps being stark naked had actually made my senses sharper... Had I reverted to a more primal state? However, it was a different question entirely whether or not I'd be able to use my improvised harpoon in the water.

It was true that buoyancy was taking effect, but that buoyancy was actually making it harder to control the spear as I wanted—it would easily slip out of my hands.

Part of it was due to the fact that my grip strength had weakened from overdoing my pitching practice, but I had still been careless. Most likely, a proper harpoon would have had some sort of strap to wrap around my wrist.

That must be the difference between a harpoon and a spear.

Instead of capturing any fish, all I succeeded in doing was dropping my harpoon onto the ocean floor (not that it was that deep. I hadn't gone that far out), so my motivation fell sharply—seeing as it hadn't been that difficult to craft compared to the *kamado* stove, it would have fine for me to just remake the harpoon, but the thought of having to do the same thing again made me give it up as hopeless.

With how quickly I gave up on things, was it a virtue of mine, or a vice?... Well, I could probably get some practice in when I had more leeway, but for right now, I wanted to catch at least a single fish.

I needed to create that leeway myself.

Even just by being able to confirm the presence of fish, it was worth jumping into the ocean, despite being dead weight—perhaps I could even go with the idea of making a net out of ivy and catch a whole bunch of fish in one go.

However, the action I took on the second day of being a castaway was the same primitive action I'd taken on the first, which was to hit a stone against a boulder.

To be more precise, I was hitting the top of a boulder that was half-submerged in the ocean—this was a simple fishing method in which fish hiding around the rocks would be stunned by the impact and float to the surface.

Incidentally, this was prohibited by the law.

Together with the method of running an electric current across the water's surface to electrocute the fish, this was considered a rather crooked method of fishing, but unfortunately, I had no desire to follow the law to the point of starving to death.

And, it went pretty well.

As expected, there was a reason it was prohibited by law... Fish bobbed up one after another to the ocean's surface—they were all the size of a goldfish, which meant they were pretty small, but, well, fish were fish.

I'd never gotten my hands on a goldfish bowl, but this was a haul of fish deserving of a gold medal... Although, it would be a lie if I said I didn't feel guilty using this method.

On top of being at an age where I couldn't sympathize

with the concept of fishing for sport (was it the same as nobles hunting foxes?), I couldn't help but feel that I'd cheated, even if it was for the sake of my survival.

It was as though I'd fallen to the same level of creatures as hyenas—well, there was the idea that hyenas were actually better than lions at hunting, despite their image... Well, before comfortably immersing myself in thoughts of karmic retribution, I may as well fill my empty stomach first.

I grabbed as many of the stupefied fish I could carry (stupefied—it was a word that could have a different meaning for me, as someone who'd aimed for the seat of a god[74]) and brought them on land, and from there, I went about fileting them and making carpaccio and making sushi... Or so I would like to say, but of course, having been pampered for most of my life, I naturally didn't possess such cooking skills.

I didn't even know how to cook rice.

I was the type of person who'd be told to wash rice and end up washing it with detergent—but, for this sort of "kids these days" topic, I felt that, in the first place, it was a bit mean-spirited to use the word "wash" here.

The proper term should be "polishing rice".[75]

I was feeling so hungry that I almost wanted to swallow these fish whole, but I swallowed that idea down instead—of course, I meant that I swallowed my hunger, not the fish.

Eating Japanese icefish[76] *odorigui* or *ikezukuri*[77] probably wasn't bad, but even if I had no skill in the culinary arts, I still wanted to make sure the fish were cooked—perhaps I should have started the fire in advance, but it was only when I grabbed the slippery fish with my hands that I realized that I would need to prepare them, so I wouldn't have known beforehand.

If only I could have spent a little more time living on my own, I could have mastered the skill of cooking for myself and worked out a better procedure from the start.

Fortunately, with the fortunes of the ocean,[78] the sun had been shining the whole time during my difficult struggle, and the dampness in the area had been completely cleared away—a natural dehumidifier. I devoted myself once more to pitching practice even more than the ace of a baseball club would, and thus the work of starting a fire.

It seemed I was more suited to being a baseball player than a competitive swimmer. But in any case, it ended up just being more of striking stones against a boulder for a while (I'd learned a little about making advance preparations, so I had even rebuilt a simple *kamado* stove ahead of time).

I knew that I should have been preparing the fish in ways like scraping off the scales or removing the innards, but for fish of this size, it wasn't possible for me to manifest a craftsman's fastidiousness for such time-consuming work—well, you didn't need to remove the innards of Japanese icefish, right?

If I were to die here, then we could simply conclude that Sengoku Nadeko could only amount to that much of a person.

To compensate, I made sure to grill them thoroughly (I didn't have any pans, so I placed some flat stones on top of the *kamado* stove for some hot stone cooking), and I very gratefully partook in these lives that were so very tiny, but so very large from my perspective—I couldn't say that this meal was all that filling for my stomach, but I had to say it was an exceptional one.

It was exceptionally extraordinary.[79]

This was a very wasteful meal, very poor in cost-effectiveness, in which I probably consumed more calories than I gained, but next time, I could probably do a little better—but first, I would need to figure out a way to maintain the fire in the *kamado* stove before the next rainfall.

I had to build a waterproof *kamado* stove.

And so, after "fire" and "water", I even managed to reach the goal of "food"—without taking time for a break, the next matters I needed to rack my brains about were, from the basic necessities of "clothing, food, shelter", "clothing" and "shelter".

Of these two options, I could imagine that my preferences would come out in which one I decided to prioritize—but the difference in temperature between daytime and nighttime was just as I'd experienced last night. It wasn't the kind of environment where I could catch a cold and go, "Lucky that I can skip school!" while making a victory pose—not to mention, I was already a school dropout.

I'd gained a lot of energy from that starry sky on the first night, but when I thought about how often it was cloudy or rainy, I couldn't afford to keep pursuing my romantic ideals.

For the sake of keeping myself warm, "clothing" and "shelter" were pretty much the same in value, but if I were to prioritize "clothing" first, it would become possible for me to enter into the mountains and harvest their bounties.

I would unlock new areas to explore.

If I were lucky, I might even find some caves or limestone caverns, which would resolve the problem of "shelter" at the same time—considering that, in the future, I

would have to explore the entire island to look for other survivors, I felt that I'd be better off starting as early as possible so as to not waste any more time.

Therefore, I had no intention of voting "nay" on the opinion of prioritizing "clothing",[80] but personally, I was more attracted by the choice to prioritize "shelter".

My "balance" seemed to shift in that direction.[81]

I'd been treating these squalls as simply blessings from the heavens, but if this kept up, they would end up being a factor in me catching a cold... Being soaked by the rain was also probably consuming a lot of my stamina.

That wouldn't change even if I were to wear clothes... Rather, if I were to get soaked with clothes on, my discomfort levels might be even higher.

So I couldn't suppress my desire to put shelter from the rain and sun first—and my situation was such that it was easier for me to imagine the construction of a small hut compared to any clothing.

And maybe I could make better progress with needlework once I was under a roof?

Perhaps I'd discover my talents as a seamstress?

According to Kaiki-san, my (original) mission was to ascertain why Araundo Uroko-san had made Iriomote Island her current location, but irrespective of that mission, it was clear to me that I needed to ascertain where my current location was in the first place.

For this question with no wrong answer, I had decided on "shelter" via the above thought process, but going through all this trouble ended up being comically absurd, because I had been unable to fully complete either of those tasks perfectly.

The question of which one to do first wasn't important, because I could not do either of them—but it was a matter of course. Things had gone too well up until now.

It wasn't exactly that things had gone well from the moment I drifted onto this uninhabited island, but seeing as I had managed to check "fire", "water", and "food" off my to-do list, it was really quite the accomplishment for me.

I'd used up all my luck.

It was a bit embarrassing to list all my shortcomings one by one, but if I were to only speak of my achievements, it would end up just being cherry-picking. I'm sure you would like to read all about my failures instead, right?

Regarding how my haphazard sustainable strategy for growth ended in failure, it all began when I underestimated the

act of building a house—because I'd been able to build a *kamado* stove, misshapen as it was, I'd gotten carried away, thinking that I could just size it up to make a hut, but that plan hadn't been any good at all.

Since there was a mountain's worth of wood and stones around me, I'd been dreaming of combining those as needed to create something like the waiting area at a bus stop, but apparently, mathematically speaking, the logic went that if the size doubled, the weight would increase eightfold.

The square-cube law.

It was knowledge that I wasn't sure if I'd learned while I still attended school... But to sum it up, if I were to build the real thing while assuming it would be the same as a model, it would be unable to bear its own weight and collapse.

If I were to sleep inside this building (or this crumbling? 82), it was basically the same as creating a device to euthanize myself—a humane execution device, just like a guillotine. The ropes made of ivy that I strung together were not strong enough to keep supporting the roof.

Building a house was really this difficult, huh.

Right now, I had run away from home, but this really made me think that my parents were incredible for owning their own home—though it's not like my parents built their house from scratch.

Regardless, it really sapped my motivation to see something I worked so hard to build collapse on its own... It was the same for the harpoon I dropped onto the ocean floor, but this must be how it would feel if my manga manuscript were to get rejected.

It really drained me of my will to do anything.

In that sense, because tackling "shelter" had ended up being an irrecoverable problem, I had even lost the energy to attempt to create "clothing" at the same time, even though I hadn't even tried anything.

After all, unlike a shack, I couldn't even visualize any blueprints for making clothes—or in this case, I suppose they would be called sewing patterns? If I imagined that I'd returned to primitive times, I could also imagine that the trending style was to skin the pelt of a beast and wrap it around their waists... But if I were to encounter any sort of beast, I'd be the one to get skinned.

To encounter a beast in the first place, I would need to head deep into the mountain forest, and to head deep into the mountain forest, I would need to make clothes to protect

myself... I was basically going in circles here.

I couldn't simply go haphazardly.

I didn't want to receive any retribution, either.[83]

For the sake of my own safety, I could make clothes out of leaves and tree bark—that was certainly something I was capable of even with my current survival ability.

Even if creating a complex three-dimensional object was difficult, I could still wrap a largish leaf around my body in a coat style, like a *yukata* or a poncho... But it would take me a little more time before I could brazenly and shamelessly refer to it as clothing.

However, as for whether or not such a flimsy outfit would be warm enough... On top of that, I couldn't help but feel that wearing prickly leaves and wood in direct contact with my skin, especially with my shoddy handiwork, ran counter to my objective of avoiding cuts and gashes on my skin.

I'd heard that you could make clothes out of fish skin, too... But I figured you probably didn't use the skin of Japanese icefish or goldfish.

Maybe I could make a seashell bikini?

That seemed like something simple that I could make without needing to try too hard, but if I were to put together such sexy clothes, it didn't seem all that different from just being naked... I couldn't deny the fact that, aside from my embarrassment, it would be easier for me to go in and out of the ocean or escape from the rain if I was naked.

It was true that it made it easier to move.

If I didn't have to think about entering the mountains, then honestly, in the short-term, it actually felt pleasant.

If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound—much like that philosophical question, if I was naked on an uninhabited island with no one around, was it really all that disgraceful?

Perhaps the only issue was whether or not I might catch a cold?

If I were in a snowy region, then it would become absolutely necessary for me to make clothing, almost as important an element as "fire", but this was in the south—what if I just pretended I was on a beach in southern France, made that the reason for my appearance, and stopped worrying about it?

Well, if this were a snowy region, I could potentially have solved the problem of "shelter" through a different approach—when I was in elementary school, there had been a time when I

built a *kamakura* snow hut[84] together with Tsukihi-chan.

Kamakura...

"....."

Ah—so there was that option.

Apparently, snow fell even at the Tottori Sand Dunes, but of course, it wasn't as though I was expecting snow to follow after squalls on this beach—I wasn't going to perform any prayer for snow while naked, not that I'd performed any prayer for rain, either.

I didn't need to hope for snowfall, because even if this wasn't the sand dunes, didn't this beach have plenty of sand to work with?—though I'd been discouraged by my previous failures, I hit upon a new idea, a new sustainable strategy for growth, of "building a *kamakura* out of sand".

Whether I'd hit upon a new idea or I'd lost my mind was something I could leave future historians to decide, but of course, Robinson Nadeko Crusoe was not particularly confident that she could build a pit-house out of sand, even if it was smoother than powder snow.

Not that sand was all that smooth in the first place. If anything, it was as coarse as snow crystals.

For one thing, a normal *kamakura* probably couldn't normally be built by someone working on their own—Tsukihi-chan had simply been dexterous, even as a child.

However, if I were to give up on the step of keeping the rain out and focus only on staying warm, then even with just sand as the material, I would be able to build a proper dwelling—not a pit-house, but a cave-house.

It was a very beach-like idea to have, wasn't it? You know, when you go play at the beach with your friends, they might bury your entire body until only your face is poking out of the sand. It wasn't meant to be a cruel form of torture, but I could lie face-up and cover my body with sand—that would be a pretty good way of protecting myself from the temperature difference between day and night, right?

It might look pretty similar to a tanning bed, but there was no reason for me to try and get any more tanned in this situation. It wouldn't exactly make for a sleeping bag to completely protect me from the squalls, but it had to be preferable to being hit by the rain directly, and it would be possible to stay somewhat hydrated while asleep, at least to the extent that I wouldn't completely dry up—as long as I couldn't expect to find any sunscreen, it wouldn't be good for me to get any more sunburns on my skin.

I didn't want to go as far as covering my face with sand, too, so making a large eye mask or face guard might be good as well.

That sort of easy-to-make handicraft would be manageable even for me.

And, thinking about the sand baths in Ibusuki, perhaps this cave-house could serve as a bathroom, as well? It would also protect my body from bug bites... The more I thought about it, the more it sounded like a nice idea to me.

Kamakura, here we go![85]

From the point of view of an outsider, I was nothing more than an extreme loner who went playing in the ocean on her own and buried herself in the sand on her own... But the good thing about being on a deserted island was that I didn't have to worry about how other people saw me—and so I promptly put my plan into action. It was really my lucky day to have thought of this.

But rather than a sand *kamakura*, it was more like a sand *futon*.

It would be really coarse against my skin.

Rather than sand, it would feel more like being wrapped in sandpaper.

Though now I was starting to feel less like a primitive person and more like a larva burrowing into the ground... Anyway, as for this construction project that couldn't possibly fail, it somehow ended in great success.

If I were to harshly look for holes in this plan to make a cave-house, then depending on if the tide was high or the waves were stormy, I could drown to death from being unable to move in the sand, but nothing was going to start if I was going to pick a fight with myself (rather, it was more like the whole thing would end).

Like this, I resolved the problems of "shelter" and "clothing" at the same time—or rather, it might be more appropriate to say that I abandoned them.

Thinking back to when I'd lived in a shiny new shrine as a god, it was a world of difference. But while I was coming up with these stopgap measures for all of these issues, and while I held onto the dream of Ononoki-chan coming to my rescue, a whole fourteen days, which almost felt like an eternity, ended up passing by in an instant.

Uh. Yikes.

I really needed to do something about this...

If you're wondering how I handled the matter of going to the restroom, I'll leave that up to your imagination. The era of me being nothing but cute had long since ended, but that didn't mean I didn't have things I was shy about—it was important to be refined even in ways that couldn't be seen. If Ononoki-chan, who'd set her eyes on the future, were here, she'd probably mention something about the shortage of toilet paper or the lack of menstrual products, but unfortunately, it wasn't that time quite just yet.

By now, I understood pretty well that help wasn't coming.

For the time being, I'd stopped moving about because I'd managed to secure "safety" and "survival", but it was about time for me to transition to the next phase of looking for survivors.

There was no point in just getting used to the situation.

Instead of waiting for help, I was going to go and help.

I had to admit that, over the past two weeks, I'd been feeling a little lethargic—it seemed to me that I had begun to feel lazy about starting anything new because of my malnutrition.

It could only mean that, even now, I was still slowly but surely heading towards my own death.

At this point, feelings of gratitude were welling up in me towards my parents, who had given birth to a girl that wasn't nothing but cute, but also surprisingly tough (I'd gotten to the point that I could be pretty casual about the words "nothing but cute", but I was sure my appearance looked rather feral. That was something I could tell even without a mirror), but there were limits to my toughness—ultimately, searching for survivors was also for the sake of my own survival. Compassion is not for the good of others, they say.

My mental state had reached its limit, as well.

It was possible that this was harder on me mentally—okay, this might be slightly skewed from feeling lonely or finding it hard to live on an uninhabited island, but please hear me out.

I really wanted to draw!

It was not that I was so emotionally moved by the scenery of this southern island that I needed to pick up a pen and draw, like Gauguin's attitude towards things. It was simply

that I hadn't gotten to draw anything for such a long period of time that I was starting to lose my mind, even more so than when I'd played at being a god.

I was losing my mind from withdrawal symptoms.

I realized for the first time, after being forced into a situation where I couldn't draw, that, oh, I really did like drawing manga, didn't I—not to mention, it was only in times like these when outstanding ideas, ones that seemed like they could sell millions of copies, would start popping into my mind.

Well, maybe those ideas were just hallucinations, but the feeling of missing one precious opportunity after another had grown so big that, if I were asked the question, "If you could only bring one thing with you to an uninhabited island, what would you bring?" I would answer, without hesitation, paper and pen. That was actually two things, but consider them inseparable parts of a single whole.

It was a bit weird to say this, but it gave me a sense of relief, too.

For a while, I'd doubted myself, wondering if I was only pretending to envision my future as a mangaka, with it being highly likely that I was only using that as an excuse because I simply didn't want to go to school—but even when I was so overwhelmingly left alone, without anyone to influence me, I was able to think about drawing. It was clear that, at the very least, my feelings themselves were real.

Thank goodness.

And so, I was feeling relieved, though in no way did that neutralize my withdrawal symptoms. Plus, the reality was that my overused fingers had been damaged to an almost irrecoverable state.

It wasn't just a matter of calluses.

There were tons of cuts and scrapes all over my body without me ever having gone into the woods, and even if there was no bathroom scale on this island, I could tell I'd lost close to ten kilograms of weight over the past two weeks.

I wasn't at the point where my ribs were sticking out, but I'd lost so much fat that it felt like my abs would be visible soon... Were there even any crazy passionate fans that wanted to see Sengoku Nadeko with a six-pack?

The sleeping bag made of sand, which I'd thought was a good idea, ended up being not so good as the days went by. Because the weight was like a comforter's, it was probably putting that much more stress on my body—so my body wouldn't really be getting any rest, even when I was asleep. I

might as well be trying to sleep while having picked up a heavy *konaki-jijii* ghost.[86]

Or perhaps the sand-throwing *sunakake-babaa*.[87]

If I were to keep this lifestyle going, my condition would gradually get worse and worse—for the sake of searching for survivors, for the sake of searching for food that was far more filling and nutritious, and for the sake of searching for any kind of home that I didn't have to build myself, like a cavern, it had become clear to me that I needed to make some clothing.

I was certain.

When I was still a middle school girl, I'd been a girl whose girl power wasn't particularly high, but who would've guessed that this predicament would make me fashion-conscious? Becoming a castaway was quite something.

Well, it wasn't as though I hadn't come up with any ideas at all for my clothing over the past fourteen days, so there was a plan I wanted to try out—when my thoughts turned towards seeking materials from the ocean and not the mountains, a seashell bikini being the first thing that came to mind was an error caused by my mind being poisoned by modern society.

The idea of using fish skin might have been good if it were feasible, but come to think of it, didn't seaweed grow naturally in the sea, just as trees grew naturally in the mountains?

Kelp.

Unlike leaves or tree bark, it didn't have an irritating texture, being slimy almost as if I was applying moisturizing cream, so it made for the ideal fabric to protect my sunburned skin—it wasn't the angel's raiment but the ocean's raiment, and if push came to shove, I could even eat it, making it a doubly useful material.

There wasn't even a need to use a sewing pattern to make them into proper clothes. With kelp that was long enough, I could simply wrap it around my body like bandages, making it no different from protective clothing—although, it would be pretty smelly.

It would carry the smell of the sea.

In terms of the fragrance, my feral self couldn't really complain about the kelp, so I just needed to put up with it... So, if I were to close my eyes tight and ignore all the various little problems and focus on the most important problem that needed solving, it would be that I had only gone into the shallow parts of the ocean, for fishing or otherwise, which meant that I had not gotten a single glimpse of seaweed.

To be precise, I'd seen a lot of small bits, but what I was looking for right now was kelp-like seaweed at a size that could at least be used as a bandage—instead of staying at the "beach", I would need to seriously go to the "ocean floor" in order to find it.

In other words, it meant I needed to go further out to sea.

Extending the safety rope... Special training for swimming... Special training for diving... Would I be able to find some kind of plant that I could use for a snorkel...? And I needed to manufacture some sort of sickle to harvest the slippery kelp from the base—even though it was the ocean, a mountain of work had just piled up. Without complaining about my motivation levels, I needed to remake my harpoon, too...

Ah, jeez, I really wanted to draw manga.

I definitely wanted to make these experiences into a manga. And not a novel.

Having faith that this route would connect to the future, I squirmed my way out of my sleeping bag of sand, beginning my activities for the day—my caterpillar movements were getting better and better.

Perhaps my pen name could be Gregor the Muzamuza.[88]

I had a good failure and a bad failure, but which one would you like to hear first?

I see. So you prefer that, too.

Then, according to your wishes, I'll start with the bad failure.

By hitting a rock against a boulder, I'd made a grass sickle—or, in this case, a kelp sickle. Up until then, things had been going well. From the first day, I'd thought I'd become an ability user of "fire" and "water", but perhaps I had actually become an ability user of "stone" instead.

Sengoku, master of a thousand stones.[89]

Then, I lengthened the safety rope more and more like an extension cord, and I secured it to my torso more than necessary and headed towards the open sea—I'd talked about special training, but just like how people say, "practice makes perfect", I really did get better at swimming over the past two weeks (at least, in the shallows).

I didn't skip out on training out of laziness, okay?

However, "swimming" and "diving" were completely different skills, and as I'd touched upon previously, the bodies of humans were fundamentally made for floating. It was difficult to sink to the ocean floor, even in spite of the instincts of land creatures.

It might have been different if I had swimming goggles, but I couldn't hope to obtain such luxury goods here—I'd tried to make a snorkel, but after some trial and error about whether or not I'd be able to make a straw out of weeds, I hit a dead end.

Because they were called straws, I'd had the faint hope that I'd be able to use weeds as a substitute,[90] but if I were to hold something like that in my mouth while diving underwater, I would basically be personifying the expression, "A drowning man will clutch at straws."

Becoming a diver didn't come easy.

When the structure of human bodies made them float, the precise reason was not the density of muscle, but that the lungs contained air like life vests. If one were to exhale all the air in their lungs, the body will naturally settle to the bottom of the ocean, which people will refer to as a natural death.

Or rather, a suicide.

If possible, I wanted to go underwater with the oxygen tank of my body at full capacity... Even more so, considering the

amount of time it would take to harvest the kelp.

After much deliberation, I decided to use my innate special skill as a "stone" cheat ability user—in other words, I dove into the ocean while holding a decent-sized stone in my arms.

You couldn't really call this anything but suicide.

However, when I looked it up afterwards (as usual, it was only if there was an afterwards in store for me), it seemed that scuba divers would add weight to their wetsuits to reach further depths.

So I'll insist that I was doing the same.

Of course, I was able to apply enough intelligence to repeat the trial and error of finding the appropriate stone weight in shallow waters, so that I didn't go in blindly for the real thing—however, I'd decided from the beginning that, because I was taking the psychological-horror-like high risk of walking into the sea with a weight stone in my arms and a handmade sickle in my mouth, there should naturally be a commensurate high return for my efforts.

It had to be that way.

As I walked on and on, I couldn't see any kelp—rather, I had been looking forward to finding the boundary where the footing underneath me turned from "beach" to "seafloor", but such a line ultimately did not appear.

Rather.

What I could see with my blurred vision was, most likely, a coral reef—I didn't have any decisive evidence, and I had absolutely no idea what a coral reef was fundamentally meant to be, so I was only speaking from my own unsubstantiated impressions, but the colorful soil, which was neither rock nor sand, nor soil nor loam, was probably a coral reef.

Welcome to Okinawa.

A piece of nature of our Mother Ocean, deserving of protection, was right there in front of me—indeed, this scene could be called one of Earth's treasures. It made me think that this would be the best if I had goggles with me—and I almost committed the cardinal sin of dropping my weight stone onto the coral reef.

But, before I could admire that great piece of nature, there was an important announcement—according to my superficial knowledge, coral reefs were inedible. I'd heard of cooking with goat meat before, but I'd never heard of cooking with coral—what I wanted to see right now was not a colorful coral reef, but a mundane colony of kelp.

At this point, even sea grapes were fine.

In the first place, I'd set out without any knowledge of what kind of soil kelp grew in, or how it grew—on top of being reckless, I was also clueless about kelp.[91] Good grief, it just wouldn't do to go back empty-handled after coming all the way here.

At the very least, I wanted to catch some fish before returning.

My experience was informing me that if I took the weight stone I was holding and hit it against a boulder on the seafloor a little ways back, I'd be able to acquire a decent haul of fish—naturally, buoyancy affected this stone, but I'd heard rumors before that shock waves were easily transmitted through the water. Apparently, they were transmitted more easily than rumors themselves.

Basically, if I were to drop my weight stone towards the ocean floor and didn't get away from the area quickly, there was a possibility that I could make myself faint and end up floating to the surface. But seeing as I was constantly choosing between life and death at all hours of the day, I was getting pretty used to making these kinds of decisions.

Death by drowning, or death by starvation?

They were the worst possible choices, but in terms of which one would cause more suffering, I vaguely thought that the latter was worse with how it took more time—and so, I let go of the weight stone and headed for the surface at full force to get some oxygen.

At this point, maybe about eighty percent of the air in my lungs had been converted into carbon dioxide—however, this attempt at escaping as fast as I could was probably not something a cleverer person would have done.

Experience ultimately brought forth negligence.

Because of the buoyancy of the stone, the impact of the shock wave was weaker than I was expecting, and I did not faint. And had I expected a school of fish to rush out in surprise, perhaps I could have killed one of them with the kelp sickle I'd been holding in my mouth—but among the fish that had rushed out, there was a big one.

And though I said "among the fish", the big one was not exactly a fish—it was a squid.

Assuming my eyes weren't wrong with my vision being blurry from being underwater... It was probably a squid, but if not for that, it was some kind of cephalopod. Among the fish that scattered in all directions, there were some other fish large

enough to be worth eating, but out of all of them, I really wanted to get the squid the most...!

But as they say, the biggest fish was the one that got away.

Although, this wasn't a fish, but a mollusk.

To properly explain why I was so frustrated, my irritation wasn't just due to my hunger—and it certainly wasn't that I was feeling so lonely that I wanted to play pirate with a giant squid.

After all, squids will squirt ink, right!?

Together with octopuses, they were considered the ninjas of the ocean, but from my perspective, they were basically the mangaka of the ocean! I didn't care about frying up the tentacles to eat, if only I could get my hands on its ink—well, there *was* something like squid ink pasta, so the ink was probably edible, too, but rather than that, right now, I was a maniac for ink.

I was thirsty for some squid ink.

Even if I hadn't been in the middle of rising to the surface for oxygen, I don't think I could have successfully caught the ninja of the sea with my fishing skills and without a long-range harpoon, but if I had at least tried to aggressively capture it, it might have at least squirted ink at me... Ah, I really let that chance slip by, didn't I?

It was a shock to me, on the same level as learning that my favorite weekly magazine had been discontinued.

...No, no, I had to calm down.

I really was becoming crazy, here.

I wasn't frying up any tentacles, but it was like my brains were fried.92

Even if the squid were to squirt ink at me, how would I have retrieved it from underwater...? It probably wouldn't be as easy as carefully ladling it out and boiling the water away. There could be a plan of capturing the squid alive, raising it in the shallows, and using it as a living inkwell to squirt ink whenever I needed it, but it really wasn't the time to be seriously considering that.

What would I even do with only ink?

I didn't have a G nib pen or a spoon nib pen, or even a writing brush—for that, I could maybe whittle down a branch to use (maybe it was the wilderness's influence, but my hair seemed to have grown a lot in the past two weeks, so I could cut some of it off and tie it up to make a brush), but I certainly didn't have any manuscript paper to work with.

Was I really going to strain wood chips and dry it out in the sun to try and make paper? Or look for wood pulp? I may have become an ability user of “stone”, but I wasn’t an ability user of “wood”.

If I at least had a carton of milk, I’d be able to make a picture postcard.

Aah, I was losing my mind.

If anything, I’d probably been mistaken in thinking it was a squid. It had to have just been an optical illusion created by my desires, a shade of fatigue, and the magic of the coral reef—it was probably a needlefish, or some other long type of fish, right?

No, no, let’s be optimistic here. I could interpret this as me having exercised my imagination skills during this survival lifestyle—goodness, I was feeling like a house built on sand.

"..... (Burble, burble, burble.)”

On sand? Sand?

Even if I didn't have any manuscript paper, and even if I didn't have any ink, as long as I had a single stick, I would be able to draw as many drawings as I wanted on this sandy beach! That was what I'd finally realized, but at this point, I was still in the middle of making my bad failure.

I hope you've been enjoying this.

Tremble, tremble.

The vast canvas of this beach was something I'd had access to from the very beginning, but I'd been satisfied with only lining up a large SOS with rocks—during the chatter with Ononoki-chan and Kaiki-san back in the plane, we'd even gone and talked about the country of Chile, so why hadn't I been able to think of the Nazca Lines? There was something wrong with me, if I couldn't catch onto such obvious foreshadowing.

...The Nazca Lines *were* in Chile, right? Peru... Argentina... No, according to my geographical intellect, it had to be Chile![93]

False impressions could be pretty frightening, but either way, I'd been extremely cautious so as to not even leave footprints that would mess up the SOS—however, for those three letters that weren't discovered for two weeks, it probably wasn't so important to take such good care of it (I'd also written out my faint recollection of Morse code with rocks, but I'll spare the details).

Speaking of what was important, now that I knew that a school of fish was hiding in the boulders at the bottom of the ocean, it did come to mind that my biggest priority was to unravel my safety rope and reconfigure it into a casting net, but my reasoning capabilities had been overwhelmed by the power of emotion.

Regardless, I wanted to draw. I wanted to draw manga.

I wanted to try out the ideas I'd thought of.

Apparently, in some places, it was illegal to even draw in the sand, but for now, I'll plead the defense of necessity. With a butterfly stroke that almost made it seem like I'd been a competitive swimmer in the past, I headed back to the beach—to look for a good branch near the edge of the forest.

Although, by the time I was choosing a branch, I ended up not being very choosy.

Even though I'd been on the verge of running out of energy, my excitement flared up in an unbelievable manner. I finally understood the feelings of a couple eager to draw a

lovers' umbrella[94] in the sand of a beach, although I was alone.

Of course, what I wanted to draw was not a lovers' umbrella, but an actual work of art. It was a bit different from drawing on paper, but for now, I could start with a 4-*koma* manga.[95]

The leading part would be Ononoki-chan.

At one time, I'd been constantly drawing Ononoki-chan posing like various sculptures or paintings, so it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Ononoki-chan was my main.[96]

I could easily draw a rough sketch of her freehand—a sand picture couldn't even be considered a rough draft, but regardless, I began drawing for the first time in two weeks.

(1) Ononoki-chan drifts ashore.

(2) She immediately escapes through her inherent movement abilities.

(3) However, no matter how many times she tries to escape, she keeps landing on the uninhabited island.

(4) "This isn't an uninhabited island, but an unlimited supply-land!"[97]

—Hm?

It wasn't very funny, right?

I couldn't hear any roaring laughter in response to this live performance... Of course, it was because this was an uninhabited island, but the audience in my heart should have broken out in a standing ovation.

How strange. Over the past few weeks, I should've stocked up a whole bunch of world-changing ideas... Maybe it wasn't good to end a manga using wordplay as the punchline?

In terms of how dynamic the drawings were, I did feel like I expressed the jumping of "Unlimited Rulebook" pretty well in just two panels... Perhaps I'd gotten too cheeky as a mangaka-to-be, and now I was in a slump.

But this wasn't a slump, it was just scrap.[98]

While I thought about what went wrong, either high tide was approaching or Mother Ocean herself was telling me it was subpar, for the waves negated my drawing, like wave-dissipating concrete blocks—well, saying "like wave-dissipating concrete blocks" was far from a wordplay punchline, it just didn't make sense.

It wasn't negation, but cancellation.

I'd drawn out my 4-*koma* in the wet part of the sand close to the shoreline so that it would stand out, so I'd expected it would vanish eventually, but I realized that perhaps the worst part of it was the fact that I was treating it as just a practice

piece.

It wasn't just subpar, it was submerged.[99]

Incidentally, up until this point was my "bad failure"—for me, compared to not being able to harvest any kelp or letting that school of fish get away, there was no worse failure than "having my manga be unfunny".

My pride, at the very least, was all grown up.

If I were to argue that "I wasn't aiming to be a 4-*koma* artist in the first place", I wouldn't be able to achieve anything—I couldn't deny that my spirits had been dampened somewhat, but my insatiable desires knew no bounds.

I want to draw manga, I want to draw manga, I want to draw manga!

And especially, a masterpiece that'll be left behind for posterity!

Especially if I was going to end up dying here on this uninhabited island.

This egoistic desire was, however, entirely feasible, as long as I gave up on the "masterpiece" part—after all, it wasn't as if the Nazca Lines were drawn on sand.

I had to remember that I had become a "user of stone"—so, instead of this beach, I could just use a boulder as my canvas.

Not anything ephemeral, but an eternal work of art that could last for a thousand, two thousand years, like the cave paintings found in France—I wanted people in the future to come to the misconception that, in the past, a mangaka had been cast away here.

I was reminded of when Tsukihi-chan used chalk to scribble on the asphalt when I was a kid—the fact that my childhood memories were all entangled with Tsukihi-chan made me feel a bit bittersweet, but whether it was making *kamakura* or scribbling on roads, since these trifling experiences were useful for survival life, having friends really was important, wasn't it.

I figured opinions would be divided on if drawing manga was an important step in survival, but people couldn't live without some form of pleasure. Life was all about entertainment. The fact that I was thinking about what I wanted to draw next made it clear that I was alive and well—my sand 4-*koma* may have ended in tragic failure, but my dampened motivation swelled once again.

Of course, I'd learn from my previous mistakes.

I wasn't going to blame my tools (though my tools

absolutely deserved some of the blame—drawing with a pen and drawing with a stick required completely different techniques).

Looking back on it now, I'd just been spinning my wheels from thoughtless motivation, and I'd fixated too hard on Ononoki-chan's character-design—I'd drawn that corpse doll's former design.

Her older costume.

Unlike her current outfit of a tight dress with an open back, Ononoki-chan used to wear a dress that was extremely worthwhile to draw, with plenty of drapes and folds on a puffy skirt that was covered with lace, clearly sewn in a three-dimensional state—both outfits suited her well, but while her former look may have been fine for drawing practice, her ornamentation might have been a bit too elaborate for a character in a *4-koma* manga.

Simplification was a key technique in manga, after all—even the cave paintings that I aimed for and the Nazca Lines that I aspired for could be considered extreme simplifications.

I didn't need something like a wordplay punchline. Even hieroglyphs would be fine.

Especially in a weekly serialization, it would be important to fixate on a design that was easy to draw. Yes, so my goal was eventually to be serialized weekly, what of it? But in that respect, the tight dress that Tsukihi-chan had made Ononoki-chan wear was much easier to draw.

Clothing that was smooth was easier to draw, you see.

You may have wondered why, in paintings and sculptures, people were always drawn in the nude, irrespective of gender. But if you look at it not in the artistic sense, but in terms of technique, you can reach the technique-based theory of, "Because naked people are simpler to draw".

With me having spent my lifestyle on this uninhabited island entirely in the nude, whether or not this could be adapted into an anime was a separate matter, but the feel of cloth really was hard to express in two dimensions.

By this point, an anime adaptation was probably impossible, but similarly, a school swimsuit or bloomers or anything that was easy to exercise in was also relatively easy to draw—if the characters in a manga appear lightly dressed, it may not necessarily be just for the sake of fanservice.

To go even further, manga characters were often young because it wasn't so straightforward to represent the texture of skin, or, in other words, to draw wrinkles—well, there was a

real thrill in getting to draw a complex, three-dimensional draping dress, and if I had the time and energy (and, of course, once I had the drawing ability to match that energy), it was certainly a challenge I wanted to take on. But alas, there was a limit to what I could achieve with a branch as my drawing tool.

Supposedly there were as many as a hundred thousand strands of hair on a person's head, but no artist was going to draw all hundred thousand strands, one by one, right? How closely did one need to reproduce each individual fiber in clothing? Thus, my thoughts switched over to dressing Ononoki-chan in bloomers—I wasn't really one to talk, but as a tween girl, Ononoki-chan's upper body definitely took on a form with some three-dimensionality to it—

"……

No.

No, no.

No, no, no, no.

It wasn't that I'd turned pale with the realization that I'd nearly left a drawing of a half-naked tween girl for posterity—though that was also important—but at this moment, I finally, belatedly, realized the "good failure" that I'd been continuing to commit for the two weeks since I arrived on this uninhabited island, the "good failure" that I'd been braving like an adventure. The "good failure", or perhaps, the "worst failure".

Huh? Ability user of "stone"?

That wasn't it!

I was an ability user of "drawings"!

012

It was hard to pinpoint the exact cause behind my first step into the world of specialists. There were various circumstances like formerly being a god, and even further back, being cursed by Nakuna-chan or killing snakes with my own hands, but in the end, I couldn't ignore the point that Gaen-san had simply "acknowledged my abilities".

Or rather, that was probably all that mattered to Gaen-san... There was absolutely no way that she valued my character strengths or had high hopes for my future.

She wasn't doing it to bail me out.

Though it was true that I'd been skillfully guided into this ability of mine by Ononoki-chan—to describe it stylishly like a manga, it would be "the ability to turn the manga I drew into oddities (or *shikigami*)".

"If you ask me, it's like a 'Skill of Snake Legs'—like appending unnecessary legs to you, a former snake god."[100]

That had been the opinion of the skill's developer, Ononoki-chan.

Regarding those unnecessary snake legs, there had been a bit of a disturbance, or rather, a bit of an uproar—it was a tale that had already ended, so I wasn't going to say too much on the matter, but as a simple summary, self-portraits of me in a school swimsuit or bloomers had produced a large number of Sengoku Nadekos that had run rampant about the town.

Anyone in their right mind would run away from their hometown.

It was a skill where I didn't know how it would develop in the future, or if it would suddenly disappear one day, so I was under the constant supervision of Ononoki-chan, under orders of Gaen-san (in other words, a "target of surveillance"). And while I was mainly being used for their benefit, it was true that I was able to make ends meet with this talent of mine—it was thanks to this *shikigami*-wielding (paper-wielding)[101] ability that Gaen-san had provided me with work and a place to live.

Practically speaking, it was kind of a mixed blessing, because as long as I couldn't completely control this ability, it wouldn't be permitted for me to become a mangaka (if the manga I drew would completely transform into oddities, I couldn't even begin to aim for a hit that sold a million copies), so I'd been taking the utmost caution and been solemnly abiding by the specialists' instructions and leadership. But if I

were to seal away my “drawing ability” in this situation, it would be a form of bondage that was much too masochistic.

Even though I was engaging in illegal fishing on the level of using mist nets, it was crazy that I was following this one rule for so long... With this, I had no right to be astonished by the protective mindset of allowing Iriomote cats to eat me.

I was like someone who would devote themselves to stockpiling food and then fall victim to starvation.

Conversely, I should be astonished at myself for having survived this long without breaking this rule, but on the other hand, it was true that I shouldn’t so freely use this skill until I was cornered by this much.

Not freely, but fearfully.[102]

It was dangerous enough to be unconsciously sealed away.

It was close to choosing between self-restriction and self-destruction.

This “doodling” could even influence my own mental state, immature as I was... It absolutely would not do to once again create those “four Nadekos” from that previous disturbance.

It could not be allowed.

Of course, it would be ideal for me to draw “Nadeko in charge of procuring food”, “Nadeko in charge of building a hut”, “Nadeko in charge of sewing clothes”, and “Nadeko in charge of searching for survivors” on the face of a boulder and work together as a team of five, myself included. And with that new start in my uninhabited island life, the probability that I would reach a brighter future would be fairly high—however, it was more likely that I would simply repeat my prior mistakes.

It would just become a different reality TV show.

And, unlike before, I couldn’t count on Ougi-san’s help—though at the time, it was more like Ougi-san was just making things worse—but no matter how lonely I was, the thought of creating a clone of myself that could think independently made me afraid, as if I might end up talking to the houseplants in my room.

I couldn’t afford to make my unstable mentality any worse.

In the first place (just like it had been last time), expecting such a logical division of roles was nothing more than a drawing of rice cakes.[103] The power to create *shikigami* was completely different from the power to control *shikigami*.

If so, I was better off just drawing rice cakes.

However, soon after I first activated this ability, according to what had been tried by the former vampire, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, now known as Oshino Shinobu-chan—this "Skill of Snake Legs" was not suited for bringing any sort of food into existence.

When I tried to create donuts from what I drew, they ended up with the taste of papier-mâché—part of it had to do with my own drawing ability, but there were most likely limits to what I could actually materialize. And it was one thing to draw on paper, but if I were to draw on stone, I was afraid my teeth would break if I tried to eat something... It wasn't like I was a wolf trying to gobble up seven young goats, and if I filled my stomach with rocks, I'd drown in the ocean. I would get to know exactly what it meant to gain weight.

No matter if goat meat cooking was a specialty of Okinawa.

By the same logic, I figured living beings were impossible, too—at least, there hadn't been any successful precedents. But surely it was taboo to bring forth a living being, and the brakes in my unconscious mind were being applied even more strongly because of that.

Basically, I wouldn't be able to produce any sort of livestock like fish or cows or meat—maybe it would be different if they were blatant oddities, like Anti-Nadeko or Gentle Nadeko or Fawning Nadeko or Divine Nadeko... No, the consumption of monstrous apparitions should only be exclusive to the Oddity Killer, Shinobu-chan.

So, in terms of what I wanted to produce, as well as what was possible to produce, the priorities should be a "house" and "clothes".

Out of the basic needs of "clothing, food, shelter" that I wanted, it would be "clothing" and "shelter".

I had grown quite fed up with my life of being naked and covering my whole body with sand—this was nothing like Ibusuki. I wasn't a desert scorpion or anything. It was true that Nakuna-chan hated me the way snakes and scorpions hated each other, but between snakes and scorpions, I was on the snakes' side.

Or did desert snakes burrow in the sand, too?

For winter hibernation and the like.

Winter hibernation in the desert... It didn't really feel right for me.

Anyway, after having gone on about the different concerns about my ability to the point of getting sick of it, I

probably should be prioritizing a “home” to avoid the harsh sunlight and squalls. But even though I should theoretically be able to produce inorganic substances, I had never actually been able to do so.

This was likely not due to a restriction of my ability, but due to me still being inexperienced and unable to fully make the best use of my skill—a gigantic oddity may have been possible, but a gigantic house was impossible.

Thus, I couldn’t make any planes or boats, either.

It was possible that, not just the size, but also their physical power exceeded my capabilities—perhaps I could make a miniature house or a minicar or a ship-in-a-bottle, but I wasn’t going to try my hand at those just for amusement.

If it were possible for me to build a mansion, I would have been able to handle moving out to live on my own without needing to rely on Gaen-san—or perhaps I was mentally rejecting the idea of building a house, like how I believed it was taboo to create life.

“Building a house”, and “building a family”.

They felt like taboos I needed to stay away from.

Incidentally, there would be the obvious suggestion that I could depict “fire” or “water” to liberate myself from pitching practice, but to that, I could only give the pitiful response that “my drawing ability was too lacking”.

Drawing the elements was actually extremely difficult.

For those things, you could just process them digitally, so... If only screentones could grow in the wild on this island... However, for the method of continuously throwing rocks at a boulder to light a fire, I found myself wondering if that had only been viable because my skill was involved.

In any case, my disposition, which appeared cheat-like at first glance, turned out at best to only be useful in making “clothes” in my current situation—however, I wasn’t going to ask for more here.

It was something to celebrate, that I would finally be able to wear clothes.

Like the plan I’d dreamed up, if I were to wear clothes, my range of exploration could expand to deep in the mountains, I could procure food and drink in the form of fruits and nuts and watering places, I could go around looking for good real estate in caves or limestone caverns, and, although seventy-two hours had already passed, I could go on a search for other survivors from the same plane. The dead-end routes I could take for my life on this uninhabited island were now

stretching out in all directions.

They'd received an update.

And so, I drew some clothes on a boulder.

Since the clothes were something I was going to wear, I was a bit afraid of making a mistake while drawing them, so I figured I'd trace out a draft with my index finger on a boulder near the water's edge—using seawater for the ink.

I called it a draft, but it was basically a sewing pattern.

And once I carved along those traced lines using a sharpened rock, I would be able to complete my own version of a mural—though I'd never tried my hand at wall art before, and before that, I had never tried to activate my "Skill of Snake Legs" on my own.

I'd always had the support (or the surveillance) of a specialist like Ononoki-chan or Shinobu-chan, or Gaen-san or Kagenui-san, under extremely safe conditions—and despite those safe conditions, I had still committed numerous blunders.

I could only feel apprehensive.

Thinking over the matter once again, was it really okay to use such an extravagant skill in a self-serving manner, for such a mundane reason as wanting clothes, without the permission of a specialist? Wouldn't I just be twisting the conventions of the world without any consent?[104]

Because of my regret for my previous failures, such doubts had entered into my head, and yet, in spite of all the trouble I had caused, Gaen-san and the other specialists had never said anything along the lines of, "Don't do anything starting from now."

They could certainly have done that if they'd wanted to, but they hadn't restricted me or prohibited me.

It was likely partially because they had the confidence that they could easily stop me if I were to run wild, but I had the feeling it was meant as a form of encouragement, telling me, "You'll do better next time."

Wouldn't it be a betrayal to those people if I were to shrink back, not fully demonstrate my capabilities, and be too afraid to even try to master this skill?—so it should be fine. I was making sure to take the utmost care.

It wasn't as though I was challenging a new art style, which wasn't even possible right now, to draw food or living beings or a home or the elements with a reckless, devil-may-care attitude—rather, if I couldn't even materialize a single article of clothing here, I should not have followed Kaiki-san in

the first place.

Now, what clothes did I want to wear?

Even Japanese-style clothes would be fine.

As mentioned previously, it wasn't very realistic to draw clothes with complicated structures—and compared to drawing with a stick in the sand, drawing with a sharpened rock on a boulder would be even harder. Clothes that weren't very dressy, that were as smooth as possible, without very many wrinkles—on top of that, clothes that didn't expose any skin, that completely covered the body. In that case, the best thing would be full-body tights akin to a wetsuit, but if I were to try and draw something with so little distinguishing features, it might actually be harder to tell what the drawing was meant to be.

Without even trying, I could easily imagine that it would end up like a mural depicting aliens—and in my case, it was problematic that I was capable of imagining it.

What was I going to do if I spawned not just a living being, but a being from outer space?—it was as though I really would recreate the Nazca Lines. A genre shift from survival on an uninhabited island to battles in space was something I preferred to avoid—although, survival on an uninhabited island was something I preferred to avoid to begin with.

Right—my imagination was what mattered.

In other words, as long as I could understand what the drawing was, then even if it was a bit poor-quality, even if it looked like some weird hieroglyphs to other people, that was fine—not to mention, there were no "other people" on this island to remark on my caricatures.

Clothes that I was capable of easily imagining—clothes that I'd worn most frequently over the fifteen years of my life. Clothes that were so etched into my mind that if I were to see something similar, I'd think, "Could those be related?" Clothes that had already been made into a sewing pattern within my mind.

A school swimsuit? Bloomers?

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.

I didn't even want to pretend that those were potential options.

I'd spent over a year in a tracksuit ever since I'd dropped out of school, but in terms of sheer number of times I'd worn it, it had to be *that* outfit that won out. Like how it would rain thirty-five times in a month—there was a time when I wore those clothes as a matter of course, every day, like my normal outfit, without question.

Although, I never thought that I would ever wear those clothes again.

The school uniform of Nanahyakuichi Middle School.

There may have once been an era of happy endings in which a school dropout would put their uniform back on and once again return to attending school, but now wasn't that era. Not to mention, I had already moved out of the area covered by my school district, but in the end, my school uniform was able to materialize almost infuriatingly well.

It was the summer uniform, by the way.

I had assumed I would need to repeat several iterations of trial and error, but without even needing to carve an image into the boulder, just by tracing it out with seawater, the school uniform appeared on this uninhabited island just as I remembered it.

On this island, where not a single man-made object had existed.

Of course, the uniform of my school—rather, my former school—was the one-piece type that was rarely seen these days, meaning that it was somewhat smooth without many wrinkles and thus easier to draw and easier to recognize compared to sailor uniforms or blazers. And though there were those sorts of technical reasons for my success, it didn't mean that I didn't have a lot of feelings regarding the fact that I was able to so easily activate my "Skill of Snake Legs".

I couldn't bear my feelings of shame.

Weren't you a little too regretful for someone in the middle of their youth, Sengoku-san? But seriously, I didn't think I would reach my goal with just a rough draft. Was I some kind of manga where the storyboard was more interesting than the finished product?

Because even the underwear, socks, and school shoes that I hadn't depicted had manifested as well, it was something I could only laugh at—though it was very Sengoku-san-like that a bag containing textbooks didn't come as part of the set.

When I tried putting it on—for the first time in over a year—there was absolutely no sense of discomfort. Since I was still in my growth period, there should have been some changes to my physique (and I'd also lost a ton of weight thanks to my life on this uninhabited island), but it was almost as if the uniform had been made-to-order... Maybe it had been, for it fit me perfectly. This really was it, the school uniform that I'd worn on a daily basis until midway through my second year. It made me feel a kind of affinity that really got me motivated.

Back in that class, among those classmates.

Back when I was one of them.

I could say it had been by chance, or I could say it had been by some mysterious force, but after stepping down from my position as god, my hair had been turned into a very short cut (it really wasn't that my hair had been "cut", and it really did give off a "shorn" feeling), but with enough time passing, and with my wild life on this uninhabited island, my bangs had grown to be just the same length as they used to be back then.

Well, my hair was left completely uncontrolled because of the sea breeze and the sand, so it wasn't exactly the same, not like how my materialized uniform was the same as what I'd worn before, but returning to my standard character design at the very end, after all that had happened... It unexpectedly raised my excitement levels, as though I had entered the climax of a long-running manga series.

If I had a catchphrase, now would be the time to say it.

Except I didn't have a catchphrase.

Though I almost wanted to say something with a posed look... Regardless, my acquisition of the clothing that I'd been wanting meant that I'd finally achieved success.

Now, mountain girl.

It was time for mountain hunting.[105]

I was feeling a bit flustered, but I didn't have the leeway to take a break here—this feeling of satisfaction was not the same thing as having a satisfied stomach. I felt like a mangaka with an impending deadline, but I absolutely needed to procure food from the mountains before I collapsed from hunger.

And it would be the best-case scenario if I could find shelter, too.

Of course, it would be perfect if I could meet up with other survivors on top of that—since I was no longer stark naked, it was now possible to meet others without feeling ashamed.

Or perhaps other survivors who'd washed up on this island had holed themselves up somewhere for the same reason—it wasn't as if anyone had the magic ability to materialize clothing at any time, nor would anyone be overly attached to their school uniforms.

Well, no matter. If they didn't have any clothes, I could just make some for them.

On one hand, if they were hiding themselves, then it would be pretty laborious to try and find them, but, well, I had better start with food, which could neither run nor hide—it was

pretty likely that I was overwhelmingly deficient in pretty much every reasonably important nutrient.

It was possible that I could encounter some wild beast like a boar or a bear (far from neither running nor hiding, I would end up being chased by those), so I had better carry a weapon with me—as ignorant as I was, I was well aware that I couldn't escape from such predicaments simply by pretending to be dead.

Since I couldn't really imagine them very well, hunting guns were out of the question, but making a simple melee weapon was probably doable for me. And I could have materialized it using my "Skill of Snake Legs", but I figured my handmade harpoon was fine—it was thrilling to think that my harpoon, which had not once borne any fruit in the ocean, would be useful in the mountains.

I'd dropped it in the ocean, but making a second one was no trouble. It would probably be faster to make it than to draw a picture of it.

Well, whether I had a harpoon or not, I would prefer not to encounter a wild boar or bear at all, if possible... I'd heard that wild game had a great taste, but it was more likely that *I* would be the one to be deliciously eaten.

One might think that it would be easier to make a spur-of-the-moment decision to make a run for it if I wasn't carrying a weapon with me, but even if I didn't use it as a weapon, a long stick could be useful in many ways on a mountain trail.

I wasn't going to use it as a selfie stick, all right?

Though, if there were any trails on this uninhabited island, they would be animal trails... But anyway, let's do this.

It would be troublesome if I couldn't make my way back to this nudist beach (I didn't expect to discover a cavern in a single mountain hunting trip), so, following the story of Tyltyl and Mytyl, and as a former user of stone, I began leaving rocks in the path behind me as I ventured into uncharted territory—or was it Hansel and Gretel?

If only I could actually find a house made of candy—imagine how many problems that would resolve, all at once!

I entered into the brushwood, and instead of remaining there, I proceeded even further, bravely going beyond my previous range of activities. And, as expected, there were no real path-like paths, not even any animal trails, so my harpoon came in handy pretty quickly—while sweeping away grass and branches, I headed deeper and deeper in.

There hadn't been a squall yet today, but as I continued, the humidity increased rapidly—as though it were midsummer.

I had only just put on my uniform, but it was already soaked in sweat.

Since the sunlight was mostly blocked by the trees, I figured it would be better not to come at night—no matter how brilliant the starlight was, the darkness would probably be jet black in the mountains.

Well, even if my footing and field of vision were slightly worse than the beach in which sunlight or heavy rains poured down on me, the mountains were certainly my area of expertise—as someone who'd regularly visited the mountains, and even lived in the mountains, it was a place where Sengoku Nadeko could shine.

Though, at the time, I didn't go mountain climbing while offhandedly wearing my school uniform, and I did actually have some level of hiking gear... But school shoes were better than being barefoot, at least.

It wasn't like I was aiming to reach the summit, so I was going to end up aimlessly wandering around... As a matter of fact, it didn't matter too much to me in what order I wanted to discover food, a home, or survivors, but going back to the basic principle of preserving my own life, it would be nice if I could find some fruit first.

Fruit was a bit vague of a term, but I couldn't say I was knowledgeable about what weeds, er, what wild plants[106] were edible... My knowledge of foraging was completely nonexistent. Whether it was the seven herbs of spring or the seven herbs of autumn or the seven herbs of summer or the seven herbs of winter, I wouldn't be able to tell you a single herb.[107]

In the first place, did the seven herbs of summer or the seven herbs of winter really exist?

So, it would be a big help if there were some easy-to-recognize (also, easy-to-eat) fruits like apples, pineapples, or bananas—oh, but there were some mushrooms.

While I was taking care of where I stepped so I didn't slip and fall down, I had almost stepped on them—but hmm, mushrooms...

My intuition told me that eating them carried a high risk.

I read in a book (manga) somewhere that among all the different kinds of mushrooms, poisonous ones were only limited to a few—or was it the other way around? Was it that edible mushrooms were only limited to a few varieties, out of all the different kinds of mushrooms?

At the time of Gao, Kui, Ji, Qi, what books did they read?

It was dangerous to rely purely on books, after all.

If push came to shove, perhaps I would have no choice but to go for an all-or-nothing gamble on this, but as long as these mushrooms were not easily identifiable like *shiitake* or *matsutake*, it was probably safer to not try them—even *enoki* mushrooms might be a bit scary if I saw them growing in the wild. Of course, if I did find *matsutake* growing in the wild, I would need to figure out a way to monopolize this island.

Incidentally, how pragmatic was it to suck on the roots of trees, as opposed to mushrooms? Would I get some nutritional value out of tree leaves if I ate them? In the grass, there could be herbs or mint or mugwort or basil... If I could boil some water, I might even be afforded the luxury of getting to drink some tea.

However, I just wasn't sure if a human stomach was capable of digesting tree roots... I had a smattering of knowledge that *nori* was only digestible by Japanese people, but right now, I would prefer food over knowledge.

Looking for fruit, and perhaps so I wouldn't be tempted by the mushrooms, I turned my gaze upwards to look in the trees, only enough to make sure I didn't fall over, but I wasn't able to see anything of the sort. Thinking about it, not all food will hang from the branches of trees, right?

Yes, aside from fruit, there were root crops, which didn't just grow underfoot, but were cultivated underground and hidden from view. Perhaps I needed to remodel my harpoon, DIY-style, into a shovel... If I could dig out some mountain yams without smashing them—well, it was fine even if they got smashed up a bit.

I wasn't too concerned about the shape.

I would be fully satisfied even with imperfect yams.

I had put on this detestable uniform so as not to be injured while strutting around on this steep mountain, but ultimately, before I knew it, my fingers were chafed and bleeding lightly... It really had been correct to not recklessly challenge the mountains while stark naked.

Well, my hands had already become battered from pitching practice, so a few new injuries weren't too much of a concern... However, I still needed to be careful. Even before the fruit, the plants themselves could be as toxic as poisonous mushrooms.

Plants that could irritate my skin if I carelessly touched

them.

The lacquer tree was probably the most well-known, but there had to be others—and so, the mountains were full of hazards. And even if they weren't poisonous, there were also plants like roses that were prickly with thorns.

I couldn't let down my guard in any direction.

Perhaps I should have made some work gloves.

In any case, there were no pigs that could sniff out truffles for me, and I didn't have the skill necessary to uncover root crops growing in the dirt, so I returned my gaze once more to the trees above me, but oh! In the distance, there was something like a beehive.

A beehive...!

A beehive, and not referring to the internal organs of a cow...![109]

There was the daring option of knocking down the hive with my harpoon for the sake of beeswax, but I was not that foolish—I was able to tell that it wasn't a hive of honeybees.

There weren't any bees around the hive, so I wasn't certain, but it seemed more like a hornet's nest...? I had begun to unconsciously back away. Since entering the mountains, I'd been on guard for bears or boars, but apparently, the leading cause of death in Japan due to wild animals was not actually any carnivore, but hornets.

They really gave it a cute name like "sparrow bee", didn't they?[110]—Kaiki-san had once made an oddity possess Karen-san before, but what kind of a bee was that, again? The *kakoi-hibachi*?

I'd heard that Karen-san had also gone mountain climbing. Or rather, she'd secluded herself in the mountains for training.

If those were actually hornets, then someone with a gluttonous mindset might wonder if the larvae would be edible, and I couldn't say that the thought didn't come to mind, but from what I could tell after careful observation while maintaining a safe distance, it seemed that in that beehive, neither honeybees nor hornets were in residence.

Perhaps they'd moved someplace else.

Even bees were fussy about where they lived, and yet I'd spent as much as two weeks burying myself in the sand... How pitiful I was. And I still hadn't discovered any caves or caverns yet.

Assuming this uninhabited island really was in the Okinawa region, it wouldn't really be a story that was too good

to be true if I happened to find a natural cave here... I would be fine with a hut, too.

And that wasn't totally just me being delusional.

It shouldn't be a totally impossible proposition.

Even if this was an uninhabited island, it wasn't necessarily the case that it had always been uninhabited—it was just like Ononoki-chan had mentioned, back on that nostalgic plane, right? Assuming I didn't fabricate those poor memories because of my mental toll from living on this island.

Right, it wasn't a fabrication. Ononoki-chan had certainly said that Yubu Island, in the town of Taketomi, had once been at risk of becoming uninhabited—if so, it wouldn't be entirely unusual if there were once inhabited islands that never ended up being revitalized.

And this island could be one of them.

However, considering that I hadn't seen a single man-made object after coming this far along this pathless path, those hopes were short-lived—though I would be extremely grateful to come across even a single empty plastic bottle.

No, no. I had to be appreciative of Mother Nature.

Since I was no longer stark naked but equipped with my uniform, it was hard to say that I was still one with nature ("Get out of the forest, human!"), but as I pushed deeper into the mountains, I could feel my once-dormant senses becoming sharpened.

If I listened closely, I could hear signs of life from all around me—I really could hear it all, the shaking of trees, the chirping of insects, the murmur of a stream.

The murmur of a stream... Was it a mountain stream?

Okay, if this wasn't just an auditory hallucination that I fabricated, then a mountain stream was a huge find. Of course, what my body desired right now was not hydration but nutrition, but a mountain stream could cover for the fact that I'd recklessly plunged into the mountains without even a canteen.

Wasn't this discovery of a watering place essentially a gold rush after striking gold? With the amount of overwork I had to do before to secure such a tiny amount of water—like hornet, or rather, sparrow tears[111]—I was filled with so much gratitude that my value system was plummeting.

As though I'd succeeded in cultivating *matsutake* mushrooms.

Furthermore, when it came to a mountain stream with flowing water and not salt water, the surrounding nature had to

be abundant with things to eat... Surely it would be there, the fruit parlor that I'd been dreaming of! A southern resort, instead of a nudist beach!

And I had the mental image of freshwater fish being easier to catch than the fish in the sea—I didn't expect that this harpoon, which I'd brought for self-defense, would become useful like this! Although I was going to use rocks, anyway!

Apparently, the advice stating that you should find a stream and follow it if you are lost on a mountain is not always correct, but regardless, I changed course, heading in the direction from which I could hear the sound of water.

Though it wasn't on the level of going down cliffs, the slopes were pretty steep. Still, it wasn't something I could turn my back on, and you couldn't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs—though that wasn't a good saying for my empty stomach.[112] I found myself crawling on all fours, in order to obtain my water rights.

As I thought, even if I put on my uniform, I was still a wild beast.

To start with the conclusion, there was no mountain stream at my destination—I could imagine that monotone voice saying, "That's Nade*kou* for you, same as always," but what was actually there was something beyond what I'd expected, something beyond a mountain stream.

There was a shogunate.

The Kamakura shogunate, or the Edo shogunate?

No, it wasn't that I reincarnated into a different world.

At such a crucial moment, I'd gotten the kanji wrong. I really did need more education, didn't I? Incidentally, due to my lack of education, I had no idea where Muromachi was supposed to be located. What I wanted to say was not *bakufu* as in "shogunate", but *bakufu* as in "waterfall".[113]

Complete with a waterfall lake—it wasn't anything small-scale like a mountain stream, but a massive watering place, one where I could feel the spray of water just by standing nearby.

Could this be Niagara Falls?

Had I drifted all the way to Canada?

This waterfall probably wasn't on that level, but from the perspective of my emotional state, that was how impressed I felt—what exactly had I been doing all this time, licking at the underside of leaves?

To think there was such a magnificent shower, not even an hour's walk away—although, the height difference was such that if I tried to directly take a shower, it would turn into

something more like waterfall meditation.

I could even be crushed flat.

But I couldn't keep myself from entering the water.

Stripping out of my uniform and becoming naked once again, I leapt into the depths—up until now, I'd been washing my sweat and dirt away in sand bathing or sea bathing or the squalls, so if there was an opportunity for me to soak in fresh water, I would return to my wild state without a moment's hesitation.

Of course, I gulped down as much as I wanted, too.

I wanted to fill all of my internal organs with water if I could.

For hygienic reasons, it would probably have been better to sterilize the water by boiling it, whether it was fresh water or spring water, but I hadn't been able to think of that before my instincts took over.

For this moment, it was fine if I got a bit of a stomachache.

It truly felt like I was coming back to life—was this how immortal oddities felt when they were reviving? The water currents also felt extremely good. I found myself thinking that, even if I were to return home alive, I might never need to heat up another bath for the rest of my life. Even in the middle of winter, I would take cold baths.

"Haah—"

After settling down a bit and regaining my senses, I recalled the merciless rule of uninhabited islands that catching a cold would prove fatal, so I decided to revoke my pledge of cold baths, clambered out of the depths, and sat down on a comfortable-looking boulder in the vicinity for a short break.

I was sopping wet, but without the basic necessity known as a bath towel, the only way I could dry myself was to wait—since the canopy was a little more open around these parts, the sunlight was coming down to a certain extent, so I was sure I'd be dry pretty soon.

Thus, I'd underrated my little intermission, but while my body dried pretty quickly, my hair, which had grown quite long from my life on this uninhabited island, would just not get dry.

I'd erred in my estimation.

Even though I'd gotten used to that when I'd had a very short cut.

Instead of a bath towel, I suppose I should have been seeking a hair dryer—while I was drowning myself in the cold water (just a metaphor. My feet could reach the bottom), I

hadn't really been paying attention, but just from looking at the surface of the water, I could make out the silhouettes of several fish, small as they were. Even in the worst case, it didn't seem like I would be dying of starvation here—I might as well make this location my new base.

Because of all the fond memories, I was very, very reluctant to have to leave the nudist beach, but if food and water were all but guaranteed here, I couldn't waver. After that, there would be nothing more to say if I could find a cave that seemed easy to live in, like a home that was close to a station—now, hold on!

There really might be nothing more to say!

The narrator might be stunned silent!

I looked towards the waterfall in the hopes of there being a cave of treasure hidden behind it, but of course, there naturally was nothing of the sort, but I did find something similar on the opposite side of the lake.

It was neither a cave nor a limestone cavern.

But—there was a hollow.

A huge hole that had opened up within the trunk of a giant tree that could be at least a thousand years old—the storyline of looking for a great many things and discovering only the emptiness of the blue sky was not about Hansel and Gretel, but in fact about Tyltyl and Mytyl, but this sort of real estate was something I would have never have found on the mountain in my hometown.

It was basically a cave that had been dug into the trunk of a tree.

It couldn't exactly be called a pleasant place to live, but perhaps that hole could at least serve as a nice reading nook for me...? As far as I could see from this distance, it appeared to be large enough to shelter me from the rain, wind, and sun.

Though it seemed difficult to lie down flat, I might be able to sleep inside while curled up... That's how it looked. I wouldn't be able to stretch out my body like on the empty beach, but if I had to bury my entire body in the sand to get some sleep just for the sake of stretching my body, the difference was like heaven and hell.

Rest was important, too.

If I hadn't been sitting like this, with my point of view physically lowered, I probably would have missed this dwelling at a different angle... Though it was a result of coincidence, it really proved that the mountains were my territory. A territory that was easy for me to grasp.

The problem was... How was I going to cross the lake to reach the "nearest station", the opposite shore...? The lake was shallow enough for my feet to reach the bottom, but ultimately, there was a waterfall. Considering that riverbeds could suddenly get deeper somewhere, and that the waterfall lake could swallow me up, there was indeed a risk to my life.

Thinking about it composedly, bathing and drinking water the way I did was something I definitely shouldn't have done, especially with that much vigor. The desire for survival could be quite frightening.

I figured there weren't going to be any alligators here, but there was still the possibility of leeches—if I were to let my guard down, this water current could end up being the Sanzu River for me.

If anything, I'd rather it became the Rubicon River.

I could create a raft to cross to the other side, but I felt that that would be a waste of effort. It would be like using a steak knife to cut chicken meat. Or rather, it seemed likely that a raft made using my handicraft skills would disintegrate at the molecular level midway.

That was even riskier.

Perhaps I could attempt to make a guide rope—one level above the safety rope I'd used when going into the ocean. By stretching a rope to the opposite shore, I would later be able to use it to go back and forth, like a handrail. Or the lanes of a pool... I could tie one end of the rope around a rock and throw it, and if I could get it to wrap around a branch of a tree on the other side—it would be my final mission as a user of stone.

It was time to use up my thousandth stone.

If it were two weeks ago, I might have complained about the distance I needed to throw to reach the opposite shore, but after the endless pitching practice I'd done on this uninhabited island, Sengoku Nadeko was both mentally and physically prepared.

Speaking of which, Okinawa was the prefecture that pro baseball teams went to for their campgrounds, wasn't it—with that in mind, it was as if the entirety of my survival life was coming down to this very moment.

I could have returned to the nudist beach to retrieve my safety rope, but it would be the absolute worst if I lost my way, so I decided to make a new one here. There was plenty of ivy, which I could use as the materials, around me. This sort of knitting was the perfect activity to keep my hands busy while I waited for my hair to dry—so that I didn't fall back in the water

and get my hair soaked again, I was going to sit still and quietly knit.

As though knitting a scarf for my lover.

There were no problems with the distance of my throws or my control, but whether or not the thrown rock would be able to wind the rope around a branch on the opposite shore was another matter entirely.

That was something that required not the skill of a baseball player, but the skill of a ninja.

As for how I went about tackling this minor problem that arose—I continued to throw the rock at the opposite shore, over and over and over and

knapsack on my back. Yet another thing that was ninja-style.

Though I decided to use my socks for something else.

Because my hands had somewhat lost their sensations from knitting together the rope and excessive pitching, I decided to wear my socks on my hands as an anti-slip measure—and once I reached the other shore, if I happened to touch a lacquer tree, I wouldn't develop any rashes.

After climbing ashore, it would probably be a bit unpleasant to put my school shoes directly onto my bare feet, especially in an environment where they would easily become sweaty, but if I didn't keep my hands protected, the fingers of not a pitcher but an aspiring mangaka would end up snapping off.

I'd get tendonitis before even getting serialized. What was the point of getting an occupational disease before even being employed?

Once again, I made my way into the waterfall lake. So as not to fall over, I shuffled forward with sliding feet. I hadn't noticed when I'd been impulsively bathing earlier, but the sensation was completely different from the lapping of the waves at the nudist beach.

It seemed like I would end up getting careless, thinking that a river like this would be less dangerous compared to the ocean, but I shuddered at the thought that I might slip, lose consciousness, and be swept away. And what if I was swept away to another waterfall downstream?

Grabbing my unreliable lifeline with socks for gloves, a uniform-pouch knapsack, and my harpoon under my arm, my stark naked self began to move forward, slowly but surely—I wondered what sort of person I looked to be, and what it looked like I was trying to do.

From a levelheaded point of view, I would look like neither a ninja nor a fisherman.

There were indeed points in the riverbed that suddenly got deeper, so it was pretty dangerous, but with my timid pace, I was able to safely reach the opposite shore, without even being bitten by alligators or leeches—even my lifeline remained intact the whole way through, fulfilling its purpose splendidly to the very end.

Perhaps it might have even supported my weight as a slackline.

Making sure not to rush, I carefully climbed onto the shore... And starting now, I would have to spend more time on a bed of stone until my body was dry once again.

Since I'd taken care not to get my hair wet this time, it surely would take less time—I could take my time getting a proper rest once I acquired my new home.

"Phew..."

My legs dangled as I began to think.

With this river in front of me, I could say the matter of "water" was totally resolved—when it was time for a squall, I would need to watch carefully to see how much this waterfall lake would swell up. It was quite a luxurious concern to have—I'd come pretty far, hadn't I?

Moreover, it had now become possible for me to take stock of "food", "shelter", and "clothing"—however, the matter of "fire" had made a resurgence, and it was something I needed to figure out as soon as possible.

In such a pleasant situation like this, it would be essential to have deep foresight and planning in order to maintain a fire—there was a fundamental difficulty in lighting a fire due to the high humidity, but also, in spite of the numerous instances in which I'd destroyed nature since my arrival on this uninhabited island, I knew quite well that I absolutely must not allow a forest fire to start, as I'd mentioned previously.

It would release a massive smoke signal, and that might cause a rescue helicopter to come my way. But if I was going to end up being taken straight to the police afterwards, then I couldn't very well say that I'd escaped from the island.

What use was escaping if I was locked up again?

These days, people referred to leaving a group as "graduation" and the disbanding of a group as "liberation", but I had no desire to act out a jailbreak chapter right after my escape chapter.

I'd said that Hanekawa-san might do something of the sort, but actually, she probably wouldn't. Not the present-day Hanekawa-san.

If I was going to make this location my new base, then I would need to come up with some way to manage the fire safely without damaging the forest... Making the same watertight *kamado* stove with roughly piled-up stones like on the nudist beach had me feeling a bit uneasy. I'd pretended that I'd done a good job, but now, I could say that I hadn't been able to waterproof it at all.

Instead of facing the risk of starting a forest fire every time I wanted to start a fire, there was the option of giving up on "fire" altogether—as long as I could stave off the next few

days with unboiled water and raw fish.

I'd gulped down that much water a while ago, but I wasn't feeling any signs of stomach pain even now, after all... But what about raw fish? If I treated it like sashimi, it felt a bit too much like high-class cuisine for survival life... Ah, but, I needed to be afraid of parasites in freshwater fish, didn't I?

In the first place, I still didn't know if my new home was actually usable—perhaps, from the other shore, I'd mistaken the size of the hollow in the giant tree, or perhaps the tree was suffering from rotting roots.

I couldn't allow myself to drown in wishful thinking.

Because I'd been betrayed so many times by wishes before.

Now was the time for observation.

Wearing my shoes over my bare feet and putting my uniform back on to protect my sunburned skin, I headed over to take a real estate tour—of course, my socks were still covering my hands. It felt more comfortable than I had expected, so it might be good if I materialized another set. Well, if I were going to do that, I might as well just materialize a pair of work gloves instead—it wasn't that I exceptionally enjoyed wearing socks on my hands.

The giant tree, having taken root on terrain that was far steeper than it looked from a distance, was even more gigantic up close—and the hollow had an even better layout than I'd hoped for.

Good heavens!

Without even ducking my head and curling up into a ball, I would be able to lie spread-eagled inside!

Even with such a large hole in the middle of the trunk, this tree could continue to spread its branches without withering away... I was truly amazed at the vitality of plants—it wasn't a *yakusugi* cedar, so it probably was an exaggeration to say it was at least a thousand years old, but as I stood in front of this tree that looked like it had been alive for a hundred years, I couldn't feel too proud about having survived for a mere two weeks. I might as well be within the margin of error of zero, or even equal to zero.

If it were me, an even smaller hole in my body would kill me in an instant—

"——!!"

And then, holes really did open up.

Two small holes had opened up in my neck—as if I'd been cursed, with two graves dug.[114]

From two sharp fangs.

It wasn't that I'd been bitten by a vampire.

I'd said I'd been bitten on my neck, but it was actually the "neck" of my leg—my ankle.[115]

The ankle, from when I'd taken off my socks and put on my school shoes over my bare feet—to be even more precise, it was near my Achilles tendon. Considering it was a location that was even the weak point of the hero Achilles, there was no way it wouldn't make me cry out in pain, too—or was that actually Benkei?[116] It didn't matter who it was, because I collapsed to the ground, inside the hollow, with hollow eyes.[117]

I see.

So it was like this.

As I expected, there was plenty of room even if I lay stretched out in a spread-eagled position—and, it was the very moment I'd taken a step into the dimly lit hollow to confirm that.

The moment I stepped in, I was bitten.

By a snake.

Reflexively, and maybe even instinctively, I waved the harpoon I was carrying to chop off its head—and its head had a distinct triangular shape.

I was pretty confident from the squalls and coral reefs that this island was within Okinawa, but from this, I was certain—because this was a *habu* snake.

It was the first time I was seeing one, but there was no mistake.

But, this was a blunder.

The greatest mistake in the life of a master of snake-catching.

"It—

huuuu

through—antivenom? A phone call? I didn't have either of those on hand. I didn't have them on foot, either.

Why did this happen? Why did this happen?

Why did this happen? Why did this happen?

It was my ankle that was bitten, and only my right ankle at that, but any and every part of my body was breaking out into a cold sweat, as if I'd been bitten all over with no room to spare—it felt like I was hemorrhaging from my entire body.

I almost wanted to chop my right leg off.

This unnecessary snake leg.

No, no no, instead of chopping it off, I needed to stanch the blood flow... Wash the openings, and restrict it—if I returned to the waterfall lake, the guide rope should still be there, so I could use it as a tourniquet...

My brain was just barely managing to work, though slowly, but I couldn't move a single finger of my body. This was what it truly meant to not lift a finger. In the past, when Nakuna-chan had cursed me, my body had been completely wrapped up by an invisible snake, but that pain was no match for the real venomous snake that had just bit me.

The idea that reality was the most powerful...

Compared to Nakuna-chan, who had ended up riddled with holes all over, the holes in my Achilles tendon were near infinitesimal, but I was completely incapable of courageously getting back onto my feet.

And, as I was lying face-up in this hollow.

"Hollow... *Uro*."

Uro.

Uroko.[118]

Araundo—Uroko. Gaen Uroko.

To think that the location I wanted to make into my new base was actually a snake's den—however, going back to the original reason, didn't I board the plane in order to look for Araundo-san's hideout?

As a result, I was sealed away on this uninhabited island—and met a *habu* snake.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah... Aaah..."

Even though I was neither swimming in the ocean nor taking a cold bath in the river, the air in my lungs was starting to completely leave my body, and my scream was about to be forced to conclude.

Like a fire sputtering out.

I couldn't even pass out, because I could only feel that every part of my lightly tanned skin had become a pain

receptor.

Within my mind, which was the only part of me that I just barely had control of, I began to seek the answer to the question, “Was this actually a trap?”... Had my luck simply been bad, and had I simply not been careful enough? Had I just been conceited by thinking that the mountains were my territory? Before stepping into the hollow, should I have checked with the tip of my harpoon to see if there were any previous inhabitants?

Or perhaps—thinking about it now, had the enticing detached house made of wood, prepared perfectly on the riverbank, actually been calculated to ensnare the prey known as me?

If it was the former case, then that was fine.

If so, I would give up.

On the mountain of my hometown, crowned by the Kitashirahebi Shrine, I had killed so many snakes in order to lift the curse that had been cast upon me—it was quite the poetic justice here to die from being bitten by a snake in the end.

It was a beautiful conclusion to all that foreshadowing.

In order to eat, I had used rocks to catch fish.

But compared to a crime like that, my snake-killing was on a completely different scale.

After living through my survival experience, if only for a short time, I had finally gotten to reflect on the wrongdoings I’d committed when I was young.

Yes, indeed.

What I should have done back then was not to run into the mountains and sacrifice a large number of snakes to break the curse—it was to talk properly with my friends, who I had been unable to confront or even make eye contact with.

Sorry, Kuchinawa-san.

I’m very sorry.

"……Ah, ah, ah, ah.”

I continued to think while squeezing as much air as I could from my empty lungs. For the sake of distracting myself as much as I could from the pain I was feeling.

However, if this was not simple poetic justice, but a trap that had been set by the snake charmer—then I could not simply lie here crying and hope for a quick death.

Even if I was still a trainee, I was still a specialist.

And, as a professional.

I may have collapsed, but I was not going to yield.

“Ah... Uh.”

Right... I was a snake-killer.

I still couldn't lift my body, but I consciously stopped my scream that was leaking out before it died out on its own, and used the energy from the little oxygen I had left to move my sock-wrapped fingers, the fingers that I could not lift a single one of, to crawl towards the interior of the hollow and fumble around.

Fumbling around haphazardly.[119]

For the rope that I could use to tie my ankle with.

In other words, the body of that *habu* snake that I had just killed.

I had only just said that I was reflecting on killing snakes to lift a curse, but now I was about to use a snake's body as a survival implement. My karma was growing increasingly deep.

Well, this was clearly for the sake of living.

It was an act that went beyond eating.

The venom might have already gone a whole circuit through my blood vessels even if I were to tie up my ankle now, but even so, I needed to do what I could.

After finally grabbing the rope, or rather, the headless corpse, it took even more time to tie up my ankle as planned using my sock-covered hands. If anything, tying it only seemed to double the pain I was feeling.

I'd been thinking about going so far as to cut my leg off because of the pain, but at this rate, wasn't my leg going to turn necrotic and fall off anyway?

Well, it's fine.

As long as I had my right arm.

After completing my first aid, which couldn't really even be called first aid, I then attempted to escape from this snake's den—the same way I crawled with my fingers wrapped in my socks, I would now try to do so wriggling my whole body.

This was truly a struggle to escape.[120]

My movements were more snakelike than when I'd been a snake god. These caterpillar-like movements, which I'd forged from sleeping in a sand futon, were being put to good use here.

If I could wriggle closer to the waterfall lake, even one centimeter at a time, then I could wash my wound... What if I went and found a leech to suck the venom out of me? Or, rather than that... If I could use my "Skill of Snake Legs" here... What could I materialize here to break free from this predicament?

What manga could I draw?

Perhaps this was a situation where I shouldn't be drawing manga, but instead writing a will—in order to meet

the deadline that was my life, with a hazy consciousness, I began to scrounge up material for a story.

As I crawled. As I crept and crawled.

Was it possible that keeping up a manga serialization would be even harder than this?—if possible, I wanted to produce an antivenom for *habu* venom. That's what I wanted, but I wasn't fully aware what an antivenom was actually supposed to be.

Did it have something to do with blood?[121]

I'd had some faint knowledge of a tool that could remove snake venom, but I had no idea what shape such a thing could take... I probably would be able to imagine a painkiller medicine, but I had the feeling it would end up the same way as donuts or other food.

If so, then even if I knew what exactly antivenom was, it probably wouldn't have any effect—however, if it wasn't food but medicine, then there was a good chance I could at least benefit from the placebo effect. Because the mental image was all that mattered for materialization. In that sense, it wasn't so bad to be ignorant—especially when I was close to dying.

In this critical situation—rather, in this situation with me on the verge of death, my ability to draw was surprisingly useless. Truly, my "Skill of Snake Legs" was only useful for needless addendums when there was enough room for it.

It was weak when it came to dealing with reality.

With that, I found myself thinking that it might even be better to just eat one of those mushrooms that was nearby in the hopes that it would serve as a counteracting poison... No, no, I was becoming too desperate.

If I wasn't going to believe in myself and my own drawing ability, then who else was going to?—but, myself.

What if... I drew myself?

Not that I would be doing what I'd resolved never to do again—not that I would be drawing my alter egos, Gentle Nadeko or Anti-Nadeko or Fawning Nadeko or Divine Nadeko.

But I could draw none other than "myself".

Sengoku Nadeko.

...Basically, my final composition, almost like a last will.

Even if I were to die, the me created as a work of art would remain—like a replacement trick that you might see in mystery novels.

Supposing that, in all probability, I were to fall here—though I'd technically already fallen—but if I were to die here—if I materialized "myself" as an oddity, with the exact same

experiences and thought process as the current me, then that new me would be able to live on in my place.

If I could do this, it would almost be like a philosophical zombie, or basically an immortal oddity, but my backup—no, in this case, I would be serving as the backup for "myself"—it would not be my alter ego, but the real me that would remain for the future.

I wasn't just saying something outlandish. Even those legendary mangaka, the ones who were placed on the same level as gods, did the same thing to leave themselves behind after their deaths.

By putting themselves into their creations.

So, if I could do this, then I would be able to convey my experiences of drifting ashore to this uninhabited island, my survival life, and how I was bitten by a *habu* snake inside a tree hollow to Ononoki-chan, Kaiki-san, and Gaen-san without leaving anything out.

Even if I died here.

I would still remain in their hearts.

In other words, the shedding of the shell known as me—I thought I'd hit upon a brilliant idea that I should be executing immediately, and yet, this was something that could only be described as a trap.

What was the point, if I myself was going to become an oddity?

What exactly had I learned from Ononoki-chan, who was an artificial oddity created by five university students—by creating that corpse doll, Gaen-san, Kagenui-san, Oshino-san, Kaiki-san, and, though I'd never met him, Teori-san... I didn't dare forget the unimaginable curses they'd needed to bear for the rest of their lives.

Was I going to make someone bear my curse—the "reader" of my work?

Tsukihi-chan, or Nakuna-chan?

If you curse someone—dig two graves.

What use was there in leaving behind this curse-like pain for posterity—for me, my art was not meant to be a last will or a grudge.

It's fine if it hurts.

But it needs to be so thrilling that it makes you forget the pain.

Realistically, if I were to reproduce myself faithfully, I would likely end up reproducing those two holes in my ankle and even the venom in my body, so I had the hopeless

prediction that the newly-born Nadeko would also collapse immediately as she was created.

Why would I want to bring forth such a tragic and heartbreaking version of me? If I was going to produce myself, I would prefer to leave behind, as a work of art, a version of me that had conquered the pain.

I was a creator. I shouldn't just give birth to myself—I should give birth to something that was more than just me.

Give birth...

Gaen-san's daughter—Araundo Uroko.

What did Gaen-san have in mind when it came to facing—or not facing—her daughter after fifteen years? That was something I wanted to ask.

What did Gaen-san have in mind when she gave birth to her daughter?

She didn't seem like the sort of person that would think about handing over the world to the next generation, but if Kaiki-san wasn't lying when he said that Gaen-san was projecting Araundo Uroko-san onto me, then she had to be harboring some sort of feelings.

I wanted to ask her.

So, let's go ask her.

Let's go and properly ask that onee-san that knows everything.

I'd been thinking that I couldn't ask anything out of fear, but with things like this, there was nothing to be afraid of. But in the meantime, I'd been crawling in such an unsightly manner where I didn't even know which way was forward, but before I knew it, I had reached the riverbank—my Nanahyakuichi Middle School uniform had become muddied beyond recognition, but if it hadn't been for this protective gear, crawling would likely have been impossible for me in these rugged mountains.

Even snake legs had their uses.

They weren't just limbs that I would cut off without a second thought, just because they weren't my dominant arm.

Now, to disinfect my wound in this stream... My entire body was drenched in sweat, but I needed to make sure to only put my right leg into the water, because I didn't have the strength to stand in the water otherwise—such a thought ran through my hazy mind as I tried to change positions by pivoting on my lower back.

And, while changing positions.

I hadn't been fully aware, but my field of vision had all

but ceased functioning—even though my eyesight should have been good, whatever I could see had a level of clarity as though looking at it through water, and thus I could barely make out anything.

However, I could sense it. The heat.

Supposedly, snakes had something called the pit organ that allowed them to sense, and bite at, their prey by their heat—and the heat I felt was exactly that, the heat of an animal biting at its prey.

The heat of a cold-blooded animal.

"....."

In front of my face, right up close and personal, was a *habu* snake several times larger and several times longer than the one I'd stepped on in the hollow, crawling in the same way I was.

I had seen many different snakes in many different forms up until now, but I had never seen one while lying on the ground like this, with the perfect angle to meet the snake's gaze. I was getting to know how a frog felt when it was glared at by a snake, even though I was a former snake god.

A cold-blooded animal—however.

That gigantic *habu* snake was not looking at me as if I were prey, but as if I were an enemy.

"Are... Are you angry?—That I killed one of your kind."

Or was it angry that I had used the corpse of one of its kind as a tourniquet—no, it would be a different story if it were an oddity, but expecting such emotions out of a real snake was pure fantasy.

This wasn't a game, either. What was the point of anthropomorphizing it?

If I was feeling any anger coming from this gigantic *habu* snake.

It was surely my own anger.

I'd said that it was for the sake of living, or it was for the sake of eating, but those two weren't so easily differentiated—and that was likely the case for anyone and anything.

Even if I asked what Gaen-san was feeling towards her daughter, I probably wouldn't get a clear answer—it was likely the same as my own parents' feelings towards me.

A daughter was not a mirror, after all.

...In that case, being bitten by that *habu* snake wasn't the trap of a snake charmer or anything. It had to have just been according to the laws of Mother Nature.

I had just seen myself in that *habu* snake.

My malice and enmity, my resentment and curses, and my counter-resentment and returned curses.

My guilt.

So, I had no choice but to meekly accept my fate—without any relation to hope or despair or happiness or sorrow or like and hate, without it being even poetic justice, my fate as part of the food chain.

"Ah, but—there's no way this snake can eat me—even if they say that snakes will try to swallow a human whole when they're only an inch long—"[122]

Not for the sake of eating, and not for the sake of living.

But just for the sake of killing—this cold-blooded animal, for no reason at all, flew towards my collapsed body as though it had suddenly grown wings. Having already exhausted the last of my strength to the point that I couldn't have changed my position the way I wanted it to, I was perfectly placed for the gigantic *habu* snake to aim for, not my ankle, but my neck itself.

Ahaha.

I was going to be just like Koyomi-onii-chan, wasn't I?

While crying at that happy end that I should have been smiling at, within my field of vision that I could no longer see anything in, the head of the *habu* snake baring its fangs at me—

—Was bitten off.

Its fangs, its venom, they were swallowed whole.

Without once giving away its presence, it instantly came leaping in from the side—a single, dark brown, mottled beast.

An Iriomote cat.

"Even if an infection were to spread on a global scale, if you were living alone on an uninhabited island, such a pandemic would be completely irrelevant to you—but could you really consider that to be living?"

I recalled losing consciousness by receiving a blow to the head by something like a stick after hearing that monotone voice, which hadn't just been in my mind—because it had been common for me to wake up while buried in the sand, my lifestyle had been completely disconnected from the concept of having a good night's sleep, but even compared to that, I was feeling the most terrible heart palpitations, as though I'd jumped out of bed from a nightmare.

But despite those palpitations I was feeling, I found myself ignoring them due to a much bigger shock—after waking from a nightmare, was I in yet another dream?

"I'm surprised you're still alive, Nade*kou*. Well, you were pretty close to dying, but still—"

Inside the hollow of the giant tree, which I should have crawled out of.

The corpse doll, Ononoki-chan, was crouched down beside me as I lay on my back—with the same blank expression as ever, and with eyes I couldn't read her emotions from, she looked straight at me.

Well, it wasn't quite that she was the same as ever.

Her eyes.

One of Ononoki-chan's eyes, which should have been confiscated by Gaen-san as punishment for some rule violation committed without my knowledge, had been restored, and the corpse doll was using that eye to look at me, too—and it wasn't just her eye that had been restored. She'd also changed her uniform into the layered skirt she'd worn in the past.

Those clothes that were hard to draw.

Why...? Why did she change clothes before coming here...?

Ah, but, none of that really mattered. I wanted to lift my body if I could and give her a big hug—just as Ononoki-chan had held me within the airplane, this time, I was going to firmly cling to her with my whole body.

But, as though affected by sleep paralysis, my leaden body could barely move, so instead, I squeezed out a voice, this time without screaming.

"Ononoki-chan—so you were still alive."

"I'm dead, though."

It was the usual response.

Though it was a trivial exchange, after two weeks of life on an uninhabited island and right after an emergency in which I'd nearly died of venom, it felt like an irreplaceable treasure.

I was no longer alone.

No matter what I said, it wouldn't just be a monologue.

Ah, I thought I'd failed past the point of recovery, but with this, Robinson Nadeko Crusoe's final mission of "searching for survivors" had at last been fulfilled.

Mission complete.

Well, considering the situation, it was more like Ononoki-chan found me and saved my life, so if this were a reality TV show, I probably wouldn't get the prize money...

"No, I didn't do anything to save you, Nade*kou*. People can only be saved on their own,"

said Ononoki-chan, quoting Oshino-san's words.

Even though it was the same line, the impression it gave off felt considerably different.

"I'm being serious this time. I really didn't do anything—it was already too late when I discovered you collapsed on the riverbank, and since nothing could be done, I figured I'd quietly watch over my friend as she slowly approached her death, so all I did was carry you into this cool, dark tree hollow to avoid the ultraviolet rays and squalls."

"Scary..."

Her way of thinking really was like a corpse doll's.

Was she intending on observing the decomposition of my body?

"The truth is, you really did get saved by your own strength, Nade*kou*. Tying off your ankle was the correct way to handle it, and even though you didn't get that far, by crawling out to the open riverbank, you made it possible for me to find you—it's actually very impressive. I'm reminded of onee-chan and Oshino onii-chan who survived in the North and South Poles."

"If you're comparing me to those two, I'll be extremely grateful..."

Aah, I was actually having a conversation.

Conversations were great, weren't they?

"As for what I did, I sucked out the venom from the two holes in your ankle, fed you tons of water from the waterfall lake via mouth-to-mouth, and then regularly wiped away your

sweat."

"You did plenty to save me!"

You did everything you could.

Since Ononoki-chan was originally a corpse, she was fine even if she sucked up the venom from my wound—though if it was the type of immortality possessed by vampires, they would actually be weak to venom.

"I would've liked to get some antivenom, though. I ultimately judged that leaving you here unconscious and in critical condition, or carrying you to a hospital via 'Unlimited Rulebook', were both too dangerous—I'm not an air ambulance, after all. I gave up on it, thinking that, if you were to die here, then it was because Nade*kou* could only amount to that much."

She sure was quick to give up...

But, she was right.

She couldn't just leave me in a place where *habu* snakes had attacked one after another—huh? What happened to the second *habu* snake...?

I rubbed the back of my neck.

I was feeling for any holes pierced by fangs, but far from two, I couldn't even find a single hole.

"What is it? You want me to leave a kiss mark on the back of your neck? You sure are needy."

"As if... It's enough that my first kiss was with Ononoki-chan."

"Well, it was an honor. Incidentally, my first kiss was with *oni* onii-chan."

What in the world was that guy doing?

It was information I didn't want to hear just after waking up. If I lost consciousness once more, I might end up suffering from a different sort of nightmare.

I'd forgotten what I'd been thinking about—um, let's see.

"Well, I'm glad that you're in good health, Ononoki-chan."

"I don't need to be told I'm in good health from someone who was about to die. Plus, an existence like me is the epitome of poor health. Though, my skin isn't as sun-kissed as yours is, Nade*kou*. It looks like you've enjoyed a comfortable and satisfying stay at a beach resort."

"That's right, I got to play beach volleyball and Beach Flags..."

Well, I didn't have a beach ball, so all I really got to enjoy

was throwing rocks. A quite primitive way to play, and the only flags I raised were death flags.

"I'll put my life in the southern lands up on Instagram later, so... Ononoki-chan, tell me. What happened to you, up until now? Did you wash up on this island, too?"

Being more starved of conversation than food at this point, I posed that question to Ononoki-chan—it was also true that, if I didn't talk about something right now, I might lose consciousness once again.

If this was a dream, I didn't want to wake up.

I'm begging you, please be compelling enough to prove to me that this isn't just some hallucination coming from me on the verge of death...

"Right. Let's see, where should I begin... Compared to the two weeks you spent, my two weeks really haven't been all that impressive."

"I was worried that, when the plane crashed, you and Kaiki-san were both sent to a watery grave..."

"We did. Get sent to a watery grave."

"Eh?"

Because of her indifferent tone, it had always been hard to tell if Ononoki-chan was joking, but that was a bit too much for a joke, even for her—if she had been sent to a watery grave, then who was the Ononoki-chan before me supposed to be?

This just made it seem like I really was hallucinating!

Give me a break.

"Since I'm just a power-type character, I'm not exactly equipped with the capability to withstand an airplane crash."

"Th-then how?"

In the first place, did the plane crash actually happen?

That massive snake tail that wrapped around the airframe—

"You remember, right? Before, when one of your alter egos hacked my body into pieces, the real you came along and put me back together."

"Uh... Right. On the grounds of the Kitashirahebi Shrine, I used some dirt to do that..."

Beyond just remembering, it was a grotesque memory for me. It wasn't something that I could describe as having become a good memory after time had passed.

It had simply been traumatic, seeing my friend's body in pieces.

The fact that it had been one of my alter egos that had done the deed was also included in that trauma.

"Th-then, after being sent to a watery grave, Ononoki-chan, you were able to make yourself whole again in the middle of the ocean? You can do something like that?"

"I can't. That goes beyond the limits of a zombie. Even if I'm a corpse, I'm still organic matter, so I don't end up the same way as marine debris that gets collected on beaches. If I get sent to a watery grave, I'll just continue to fall apart and be dispersed across the ocean."

It didn't seem like she was the kind of storyteller to keep me in suspense, for she said,

"At least, it's not something I can do on my own—your power was absolutely crucial, Nade*kou*,"

thus revealing the secret without any pretension.

However, even when she said it so clearly, I couldn't figure out what she meant—my power? Having been defeated by the mighty forces of nature and while on the verge of death, what sort of power could I have had...

"Your drawing ability. The 'Skill of Snake Legs'... You drew one, right? A picture of me, on the beach."

"....."

I did.

A 4-*koma* manga, at the water's edge, with a wooden stick.

"'This isn't an uninhabited island, but an unlimited supply-land!'"

"Please? Don't read it out loud?"

"Are you telling me your skill level has dropped, after such an unforgettable survival experience?"

Those were some harsh words.

Normally, I would straighten up and listen to them obediently, but right now, what I wanted to hear was not criticism—in the first place, how did she even know about it? That practice piece, which should've been washed away by the waves.

"Practice piece? I think you mean to say, 'awful piece'."

"Aren't you being too harsh? You're going to crush the heart of this budding young talent."

"Yes. Your 'drawing' was indeed swallowed up by the ocean—swallowed by the ocean, where I had been scattered."

"Ah—aha!"

When I drew that 4-*koma*, the thought of my "Skill of Snake Legs" was less in my mind than droplets of water on the back of a leaf—however, regardless of my intentions, it seemed that it activated anyway.

I see—so that was why Ononoki-chan was no longer wearing an eyepatch, as well as why she had reappeared in her former outfit.

Because I had drawn her as such.

The *4-koma* itself hadn't been all that satisfactory, and in terms of the drawings themselves, because my "pen and paper" were a "stick on the beach", I couldn't say I had drawn very well. However, what was important was my mental image.

A material image, for the sake of materialization.

Even my uniform, which I was quite familiar with, had materialized with just a rough draft—so even with such an extraordinarily bad drawing, the ever-so-familiar Ononoki-chan couldn't be anyone else but Ononoki-chan.

"...No, but still. At this point, you've gone far beyond the limits of a zombie! Even if you had my support, to be able to revive not just from being hacked to pieces, but from being practically disintegrated—Ononoki-chan, that makes you even more immortal than Shinobu-chan!"

"Keep it a secret from onee-chan. If she finds out that my immortality is at this level, I'm afraid she might dismantle me."

She had just entrusted me with an incredible secret.

Though she could probably revive, even if she were to be dismantled.

"I'm not trying to be modest here, but it was just good luck, and the situation was good. It was good that you drew that illustration of me on that beach—if you had drawn that awful piece on the surface of a boulder like you'd done with your dear old school uniform, my spirit wouldn't have been able to enter that portrait of me. It would have been an awful piece in the literal sense."

Not that there was any such thing as an awful piece that wasn't in the literal sense.

However, it sounded a bit strange to me—it was true that the school uniform was drawn with the intention of materializing it, but drawing on the face of the boulder was definitely easier than drawing on the beach... With a wooden stick in the sand, the lines ended up much too thick, making it hard to draw.

"Oh my, blaming your tools, are you? How classy of you, Kōbō-sensei."[123]

"What do you mean by Kōbō-sensei!?"

"I'd been thinking that maybe you were fully aware of what you were doing when you drew my picture on the beach, so I'm

being particularly scathing out of shock. It's my way of being *tsundere*."

"No, you were always like that when it came to my manga, you know? I'm willing to let it go because I'm so happy I can talk to you after so long, but you're going to bring me to tears soon, you know?"

Mm... But, what did she mean by "fully aware"? Was there a reason that it had to be on the beach, and not on a boulder?

Even if I wasn't picky about my pen—was there a reason I needed to be picky about my paper?

As a user of *shikigami* (paper).[124]

"I'd been so impressed that you remembered your experience of reconstructing me out of the dirt at the Kitashirahebi Shrine and put it to good use, even in the midst of your survival life. It's unfortunate that I thought too highly of you—don't tell me, you didn't even realize that that sandy beach was made up of star sand?"

"Star sand?"

What in the world was that?

If it was the Milky Way, I'd at least heard of that...

"Putting aside your ignorance, your lack of observation skills is way too dangerous. You'd better keep it a secret from onee-chan, or you'll be the one to get dismantled."

"Is it really that dangerous? My lack of observation skills."

This human being was about to get dismantled for a reason completely unrelated to immortal oddities.

That was practically a crime!

"When grains of sand become pointy like the shape of a star, that's called star sand. Okinawa is famous not just for its blue oceans, but also for its star sand."

I hadn't seen anything like that in my guidebook—but, oh. It was no wonder that my sand futon felt so prickly. It was basically as though I was sleeping in a futon of *konpeito*.

"The starry sky on this island was really pretty, so I wonder if that's why—"

I absentmindedly responded with something noncommittal, but hold on, no matter how beautiful the starlight was, there was no way it could affect the shape of the sand. Was it different from the way ocean currents gradually shaped the sand over long periods of time, like sea glass? Or perhaps the nearby waterfall already had a special way of flowing...

Though a water current would normally just remove the points and make it round...

"But, it's pretty romantic, huh? I can see why it got so famous. The sand futon may have been hard to sleep in, but thinking about how I was sleeping while swathed in stars every night, it's not a bad feeling."

"Though it's not actually sand, but corpses,"

said Ononoki-chan, ungraciously.

Lacking in grace and romanticism and feeling.

"They're the corpses of foraminifera that have washed ashore. That's Latin for 'hole bearers'."[125]

"...Well, of course it would be hard to sleep in."

What sort of coffin was I putting myself into?

So it wasn't me that was the bug, but my futon.

"But thanks to that, I was resurrected. The dirt at the Kitashirahebi worked fine, but there's no better ingredient for the alchemy of a corpse doll than corpses."

After the squalls, the coral reef, and the *habu* snakes, it had now been the prosecution's side that presented evidence to support the idea that this was the Okinawa region—however, calling the corpses of bugs "star sand" was putting it way too nicely.

"There's also a theory that they're actually corpses of stars. And a theory that the starry sky of this island, which you said was so beautiful, gave birth to baby stars and dropped them on land. And those baby stars were massacred by a great serpent living in the ocean, and their corpses became the star sand—that's a folktale from here in Taketomi."

A great serpent...

How many things were tangled up with snakes?

Right, speaking of which, I needed to tell Ononoki-chan that the hollow of this giant tree could have been a trap set by Araundo Uroko-san—although, as long as it was functioning properly as a cool, dark place, or as a rest stop, that could just be my worthless paranoia...

"No, it's certainly possible, Nade*kou*. Of course, before carrying you inside, I made sure to properly investigate whether this hollow was actually safe."

As expected of a professional *shikigami*.

Unlike me, she wasn't going to go on a house tour so carelessly—she would perfectly check the flow of water, the thickness of the walls, and even the exposure of the sun. Though I could also say, it was because she was a corpse doll that would be fine even if she were bitten by a *habu* snake.

“However, as long as this island is Araundo’s stronghold, it wouldn’t be surprising to find traps anywhere. With that in mind, you did well in surviving this long.”

“No, I came close to dying a lot, and it wouldn’t have been long if Ononoki-chan hadn’t made it—hold on, ‘as long as this island is Araundo’s stronghold’?”

Huh?

And just a little while ago, she’d said, “that’s a folktale from here in Taketomi”, right?

“Hold on, don’t tell me you didn’t even realize that much? If so, just say the word, and I’ll save you from any further shame by killing you right here, as your friend.”

The weight of her friendship was on par with that of a sand futon.

Ah… But, it made sense.

The sunlight. The temperature. The starry sky. The squalls. The coral reef. The *habu* snakes. The star sand.

And—the Iriomote cats.

The dark brown and mottled endangered species that had saved me from the second *habu* snake, eating fang with fang—if there were Iriomote cats here, and if this was Araundo Uroko’s stronghold and in the town of Taketomi, then this island I had drifted onto had to be none other than Iriomote Island!

"Y'tellin' me that I was livin' out an uninhabited island life on Iriomote Island, the second most famous island in the Okinawa prefecture, hmmm!? That ain't any different from gettin' lost in some town's forest park! It just makes me seem like a total idiot!"

I'd ended up turning into Anti-Nadeko before I realized it, but Ononoki-chan's reaction was as cold as ever as she responded, "I never said you seemed like a total idiot," in her usual monotone.

Somehow, I could sense her utter disdain, even through that monotone of hers.

"But if anything, you might have been saved because of your idiocy. If you'd known this island was actually inhabited, then you might have gone even further into the jungle in search of civilization and thus been bitten by a *habu* snake at an even earlier stage—and in that scenario, I wouldn't have been able to revive. I told you before, didn't I? The woodland of Iriomote Island is far denser than your average uninhabited island. They don't call it the Galapagos of the East for no reason."

"....."

She did say that.

So the statement that ninety percent of Iriomote Island was jungle was not an exaggeration, nor was it a form of rhetoric like the saying that it rained thirty-five days in a month. In fact, when considering the exact surface area, it might actually be a conservative estimate—the highway didn't even go a full cycle around the island.

It didn't even go a half cycle.

That meant that the remaining half (or more) of the outer circumference of the island was not connected by any road—in other words, I must have drifted onto the "back side" of Iriomote Island.

I had indeed come up with the wishful thinking that maybe this wasn't an uninhabited island, but a part of some larger landmass, but I never thought that this was Iriomote Island itself... Not even Tsukihi-chan was capable of wishful thinking so optimistic.

Like Ace Island from *Prince Ciscon*?[126]

Ah, that's true...

In that case, I'd considered the waterfall I found to be my reward for bravely entering the mountains, but if this was

Iriomote Island, there would be no need for such good fortune... According to the map printed in the guidebook, Iriomote Island had tons of waterfalls.

The Nade*kou* that trots about will find a waterfall.[127]

"Th-then, when no man-made objects were washing up on that beach, it was just because they were very thorough in their regular cleaning of tourist attractions...? There wasn't a barrier or anything?"

"Well, who knows. It's hard to say for sure, and it would be hard to figure out. When your Morse code SOS didn't get anywhere, could we just consider it bad luck? As a specialist, I'd like to offer the viewpoint that, since this really is Araundo's stronghold, it's hard to believe that you being brought here was only a result of complex tidal currents."

That was what Ononoki-chan said, but it sounded like a vague attempt at covering for me... On one hand, if the plane on its way from Honshu to Naha Airport did in fact run into trouble mid-flight, I would have needed some extraordinarily good luck to drift all the way to Iriomote Island (or its "back side").

I would estimate that it would require me to have traveled over four hundred kilometers across the ocean... Not even a sea snake would be able to travel that far. Even if you assumed that the airplane doing a Dutch roll was carried by air currents—by the turbulence...

If she invited me into her territory and waited for my gradual self-destruction... That was certainly a plausible explanation.

"Even so, because you were tougher than she expected, Araundo might have gotten impatient and set a trap for you directly—it's certainly not in any specialist manual, after all. To live a self-sufficient life without ever leaving the beach, while burying yourself in star sand."

"Well, sorry for being such an amateur."

"Unlike that awful piece you drew, I'm trying to praise you here. This wasn't just some beginner's luck. It's likely that Gaen-san assigned you to this job because she expected that you would perform such incredible actions."

Unlike that awful piece, she'd said.

But if that was true, it meant that the life I spent was far more dangerous than just life on an uninhabited island—to think I was camping out so brazenly at the enemy's stronghold.

"Especially while stark naked."

"How do you even know about that? The events on the nudist beach."

"If it's about Nade*kou*, I know more about you than Hanekawa Tsubasa does. Because I took off your clothes to wipe away your sweat. It was clear from one glance at your perfect tan, without any unevenness. How liberal of a vacation were you spending?"

Goodness.

So this was the watchful eye of a specialist—if only I had such talent, I might have realized that this was Iriomote Island all on my own. Even if I couldn't say it was Iriomote Island, I might have been able to guess that I was within the town of Taketomi. Even before being saved by that Iriomote cat—

"No, Nade*kou*. That didn't happen. I can believe all of your other stories, but that one is just a fabrication. This reality TV show isn't going to fly with such an obviously staged event."

"If this were a reality TV show, it would have been debatable from the very beginning. From the moment a middle school girl was left stark naked."

"I can see why you would want to lie about seeing an Iriomote cat, but they're a well-protected endangered species more rarely seen than stark naked middle school girls. I'll say it once more out of kindness, but they're so secluded that not even the locals can catch sight of them. They're practically on the level of mythical beasts. At least say you saw a crested serpent eagle. Since those aren't as well-known, people won't really know, so they might not care if it's true or false and decide to believe you."

That's a bit rude to crested serpent eagles, isn't it?

Also, the comparison of "more rarely seen than stark naked middle school girls" seemed a bit doubtful.

"I've been at this job for some time, but this is the biggest disappointment I've faced. I didn't think you would tell such a poor lie. This kind of lie is the one kind I wish you hadn't told. Not a lie to cover up for your own weakness, but a lie to brag about what you'd seen."

"I'm telling the truth! Don't be so seriously disappointed in me. It's a huge misunderstanding. If I really ended up being bitten by, not the second loach,[128] but the second *habu* snake, especially on the back of my neck, it really would have been instant death... And in that predicament, an Iriomote cat came jumping out without fear for its own safety!"

"An Iriomote cat wouldn't have felt any danger from a *habu* snake regardless. If the former Heartunderblade is the king of oddities, then the Iriomote cat is the king of Iriomote Island."

"Even though it's such a cute cat?"

I think she'd said that it had no natural enemy.

However, it appeared to have a smaller build than I'd imagined.

"The fact that you're saying that after supposedly seeing one swallow the head of a *habu* snake whole supports the idea that you're lying—even though you couldn't be saved by other humans, why would you end up being saved by an Iriomote cat? Are you sure you didn't mistakenly see an Iriomote greater horseshoe bat?"

"I didn't mistakenly see an Iriomote greater horseshoe bat!"

And once again, the preceding clause was cruel.

Don't say that I couldn't be saved by other humans.

For one thing, it was the first time I'd ever heard of an Iriomote greater horseshoe bat. Though I did hear that there were bats on this island... But no matter how close to death I was, I wouldn't mistake a bat for a cat—even if it wasn't a cat, but a mountain cat.

No matter what anyone said, it was an Iriomote cat.

"Well, the reason you managed to escape death is partly due to the fact that the *habu* snake that bit you was actually a Sakishima *habu*. This type of *habu* snake, which is found on the Yaeyama Islands, has a weaker venom... And they're on the smaller side."

"The second *habu* snake was bigger. I think that one was a normal *habu*. I almost thought it was a hub airport!"[129]

"Don't pile on even more lies. You're like the Yaeyama Islands of lies."[130]

"Who're you callin' the Yaeyama Islands of lies!?"

I'd retorted in the Kansai dialect.

No, there's no such thing as Kansai Nadeko, though.

"That sort of nickname is something you should use for Kaiki-san..... .... Um, Ononoki-chan."

What about Kaiki-san?

“Originally, what Kaiki onii-chan had reserved was not just first class of that aircraft—we kept it from you because we thought you’d freak out, but that con man had gotten a hold of the entire economy class, too.

“To fool your enemies, you must first fool your allies.

“To look at it from a different angle, that was how cautious Kaiki onii-chan had been from the very start—he had already thought of the possibility of an attack from Araundo Uroko in the middle of the flight.

“Being on alert for a hijacking, he’d effectively turned the plane into a private jet—considering it was for the sake of work, it would really be a business jet. You could even call it a con man’s Air Force One.

“Of course, the expenses required for such a thing would end up being outrageous, but since Gaen-san was sponsoring the whole thing, we could afford to be liberal with our spending. There was no need to be stingy.

“There was no need to use our money sparingly.

“The reason for exchanging flights, as opposed to a direct flight, was also out of caution that Araundo might be aware of our movements—though between that and his reason of wanting to ride in first class, I can’t tell you which of them was real and which was the excuse.

“And, we were indeed attacked.

“It was a completely unavoidable attack.

“If you wanted to ask if we wouldn’t have been attacked had we gone on a direct flight to Ishigaki without any layovers, I would say that that’s not necessarily the case. And if the question was if we would have been safe if we had gone by sea, that isn’t something I can say for sure, either.

“All roads lead to snakes.

“It would be natural to think that something would have happened, at both Uehara Harbor and Ohara Harbor—extremely natural. Perhaps we might have already been left stranded at Ishigaki Terminal.

“This doesn’t have anything to do with the folktale of Taketomi Island I’d mentioned before.

“But in the sea, there were sea snakes.

“Of course, it was common knowledge that there were snakes in the sky, too—in Taketomi’s starry sky, which was under national protection, the constellations of Serpens the

Snake and Ophiuchus the Serpent Bearer shine brightly, after all.

"So, Kaiki onii-san had shown the maximum amount of caution in all directions, but nevertheless, the plane we were on had been sent spiraling into the sea.

"I was sent to a watery grave, and Nade*kou* ended up drifting away—without any time to guide other passengers to the emergency exits. Not that there were any other passengers on board.

"However, there had been a blind spot.

"Even if every seat on the plane had been reserved, even if we'd taken the utmost caution, an aircraft couldn't be operated entirely unmanned, without the pilot and co-pilot and cabin crew.

"The automatic operation of airplanes hadn't become commonplace just yet.

"It's likely that every single crew member had been replaced by a lookalike... By snakes.

"Our Air Force One had been commandeered by snakes from the beginning. We were dancing in the palm of those snakes' hands.

"Not that snakes had hands.

"Perhaps we can say it was one of Araundo's five heads.

"However, we were the ones whose hands and feet were tied.

"Infiltration was the signature move of snakes, after all, or even their way of life—that's not something I need to explain to you, a former snake god. In the era of 'Nadeko-chan who was nothing but cute', you often wormed your way into people's hearts and minds, after all—well, there was no way to know the whole truth.

"Perhaps the airframe had simply deteriorated from improper maintenance... It's just as those who have a fear of flying would insist upon. Flying indeed had its risks. It's onee-chan and *oni* onii-chan, who completely ignore the risks I take when I fly with 'Unlimited Rulebook', that aren't in their right minds.

"See Volume 1 for reference.

"Basically, it was outside of our calculations, and the enemy was one step ahead of us—as a result, the aircraft, as well as the three of us, were all split apart.

"Of course, when I say that we were all split apart, it includes the fact that I, as a corpse doll, broke apart into pieces—it was all the more astonishing, thinking that I wouldn't be

able to revive again.

"But it was hard to get them to kill me off completely, in the end.

"Though I never expected to, I was able to understand, just a little, the feelings of Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, who sought death at her own hands—once again, please do see Volume 1 for reference.

"As for why you ended up being the only survivor of the plane crash, it would be because those snakes were counterbalanced by your snake—perhaps it wasn't so much as counterbalancing, but at the very least, their impact was diminished. The snakes in the sky and snakes in the sea were negated by the human snake, or perhaps, the divine snake—but it's true that this doesn't serve to explain everything.

"I'd like to raise the hypothesis that you had caught Araundo's interest—after all, it was also extremely natural for a snake charmer to take an interest in a snake.

"Like how you had managed to summon me, perhaps you had been called over by Araundo.

"If not, it would be much too bizarre for you to have drifted all the way to Iriomote Island from the site of the crash—at the very least, it should be undeniable that she was observing your survival life with snake eyes following your arrival.

"It's practically a reality TV show.

"With her having the market share of one hundred percent.

"And after hearing your story, if I were to put it all together, I find myself suspecting that this development itself was all a theatrical scam, put together by Kaiki onii-chan.

"The hijacking and the plane falling out of the sky... I couldn't suppress my desire to raise the hypothesis that that con man may have taken all of it into account.

"Perhaps he had even deliberately allowed the airplane to become a den of snakes.

"He might have even helped them aboard.

"Though Gaen-san's plans were for us to look into why Araundo had made Iriomote Island her base of operations, Kaiki onii-chan must have decided that it wouldn't be easy to approach Iriomote Island in a straightforward manner and hastily came up with an underhanded method, instead.

"Like digging a tunnel for exclusive use by Iriomote cats.

"Arguably, it could be called a waterway—a secret waterway to approach Iriomote Island from the west.

“Piercing, and penetrating—forcing those lies through.

“By displaying the obvious oversight of reserving the entire plane but neglecting to take measures for the crew, he lured Araundo into making a preemptive strike… Because of the assassins she sent in, our plane plunged head over heels into the ocean, but as a result, our side succeeded in sending our own assassins into enemy territory.

“Assassins.

“Nade*kou*, and me.

“Not even a great serpent would be capable of thinking of such evil fantasies—to think that the great Kaiki Deishuu would use the fortune built up from his cons and his own life as misdirection to send in some small fry.

“Really, what an incredible decoy tale.”[131]

"...Eh? Hold on, Ononoki-chan."

I put a stop to Ononoki-chan's monotone storytelling—I had the impression that she'd been about to get into the main topic, but before that, I needed to get one thing out of the way first.

"Does that mean Kaiki-san... Is dead? From the way you're saying it."

"He's dead. Nade*kou*, normally, people die when they fall from planes. That's what an airplane crash is. Even airplane lovers, who'll make fun of those with a fear of flying, are at a disadvantage when it comes to this one point. People die. From illness or from accidents, from old age or from an infectious disease, from starvation or dehydration or drowning, from being bitten by a *habu* snake or from being eaten by an Iriomote cat, normally, people will die."

"—Eh?"

Well.

Of course that was the case—but, it's Kaiki Deishuu, you know?

The specialist that was even able to put an end to my era of godhood, you know?

"Don't worry about it. He was already like someone that was already dead—like a doll pretending to be alive."

He just wasn't a corpse doll.

So said Ononoki-chan in a monotone.

A monotone that carried no emotion.

"You're already fifteen years old. It's about time you got to experience the death of someone you were close with."

"Um, well, er, I dunno, it might be a little too early for that—"

"There are children even younger than you that have started working for the sake of their family, you know."

"I've heard that we shouldn't treat the stories of young carers as tragic, and that we shouldn't treat them as heartwarming, either."

"But isn't it the worst if we can't tell their stories at all?"

"Ah, I know, you're lying, aren't you? Kaiki-san's just pretending to have died from the enemy's trap to deceive Araundo-san, right? To fool your enemies, you must first fool your allies—"

"It's perfectly fine if you want to think of it like that. It's

fine if you fool yourself into thinking that way. By making the boundary between life and death vague. Perhaps, as a con man and as a specialist, that was Kaiki Deishuu's final lie."

To the end, Ononoki-chan remained aloof, her stance unchanging—I still couldn't discern any sort of emotion from that blank expression of hers.

"....."

Truthfully.

Over the past two weeks, I'd been in a situation where it wouldn't have been strange for me to die at any time, so regardless of whether or not I was fifteen years old, I had constantly been thinking of death as something that was close to me. So, it wasn't as though I didn't understand what Ononoki-chan was saying—if I acted like I didn't understand here, it would just be feigning ignorance.

Averting my eyes from the hard truth.

Lowering my bangs before my eyes, and having my hair be pulled from behind.[132]

Just like in the past.

Like when I was subservient to Tsukihi-chan or Nakuna-chan by acting like I didn't understand—like when it was easier to pretend to be fooled, even when I did understand.

But—Kaiki-san.

"I'm the one who doesn't understand,"

said Ononoki-chan. In a monotone.

But it seemed like she really didn't understand.

"It's true that he was able to pull you off your godly throne, but it's not like Kaiki onii-chan could be considered your savior. After all, you probably would've been happier if you continued your reign of terror, just like that."

"That, that might be true, but—"

"And you could just think of it as him receiving the punishment he deserved for saying all those things making light of school dropouts on the plane."

"If, if it's about that, then Ononoki-chan, you said some pretty harsh things, too..."

Even so, if we trace the curse that Nakuna-chan cast on me back to its origin, it had been sold to her by Kaiki-san, so in that sense, rather than my savior, he was practically my bitter enemy.

And when he dethroned me from being a god, it wasn't as though he did it for my sake, or because he was worried about me. Kaiki-san simply had his own circumstances.

Nevertheless, perhaps it was too soft-hearted of me to

feel grateful to him, to forgive him for those matters, to put my trust in him, or to have a favorable impression of him—even so, it wasn't something I could let go of so easily. Like how, whether I brushed off or repented for my sin of snake-killing, it wasn't something I could cut away from me.

I couldn't come to terms with it.

I couldn't stop thinking about it.

"Well, you don't have to force yourself, Nade*kou*. You don't have to force yourself to understand—after all, this is the domain of professionals. No need for you to be so hard-boiled yourself. The moment you summoned me to Iriomote Island after I broke apart into pieces, you attained a perfect score for the mission that Gaen-san and Kaiki onii-chan wanted you to fulfill—your consciousness has returned, and I think the venom has faded, so I won't mind if you decide to just stay here and rest. If you decide to stay here and grieve for that lonely con man."

"...What about you, Ononoki-chan?"

I asked, feeling flustered and unstable, feeling like I couldn't calm down and not knowing whether I should be sad or not.

"What are you going to do now?"

"Well, my work isn't done yet. Not one bit. After making it this far, there's no way I can just go back home without even meeting Araundo Uroko once—personally, I'd like to go and confirm if Kaiki-san's statement is actually true, and that Araundo really is Gaen-san's real daughter ."

"...As revenge for Kaiki-san?"

"This isn't the manga you like, or the manga you like to draw. Ononoki Yotsugi doesn't behave in such emotional ways—as a professional, I'm simply going to do my job."

As a professional...

That was exactly what I'd thought just a little while ago, in this very hollow. With those words, I'd encouraged myself. If I really had been led into the hollow of this giant tree, been caught in this trap, and been bitten by a *habu* snake, then there was no way I could simply die without getting to recount my tale of those experiences—a ghost story to send chills down one's spine.

However, as Ononoki-chan said, I had already fulfilled that task.

In that case, perhaps quietly resting here was in fact what a proper professional should be doing now—"resting is also work," as people liked to say. The idea of active rest.

Ononoki-chan was implying the same thing.

Even if she was expressionless and spoke in a monotone, even if she behaved as though she had no emotions, she was still created with corpses as ingredients into the form of a human being, so she wasn't completely divorced from having thoughts and beliefs. I knew very well that it wasn't the case that she thought nothing of what had happened to Kaiki-san.

Because I was her friend.

"...As a professional, I've accomplished my task, huh."

"That's right. With this, I'm sure Gaen-san will guarantee your rent and living expenses for the next six months. You can draw manga to your heart's content. If you want, you can even prepare for the new age and put together a digital environment to work in. You can buy yourself a large tablet and pay for Clip Studio Paint."

It sounded like a good idea, didn't it.

With a wry smile... I used brute force to lift my upper body, which was still creaking like sheet metal that had rusted over. I even thought I heard the sound of something snapping.

"If my work as a specialist is done—then from now on, it's time for me to work as a mangaka."

"....."

Ononoki-chan remained silent with a dubious look.

"If I'm here right now on Iriomote Island without planning on collecting any material for a story... Someone with that little curiosity could never become a mangaka,"

I said.

Kaiki-san.

Surely, the fact that I would make this decision was also included in your calculations for this scam—but no matter, I understand.

Once more, I'll allow myself to be deceived, and believe in you.

Once more, for the last time.

"After all, ignorance is not a sin if I'm trying to learn, right?"

"Well, that's one hell of a battle cry."

Like the cry of an Iriomote cat.

Ononoki-chan shrugged her shoulders—towards my declaration, she offered no resistance nor did she attempt to stop me, simply turning her back to me with a twirl.

"C'mon. As a special service, I'll give you a piggyback ride."

"...Oh, that's it! I thought you were turning your back on

me because you were so exasperated."

"Well, I'm always exasperated with you. But at the same time, I have the same amount of admiration towards you—regardless of what Gaen-san thinks, I feel like I can see why onee-chan values you so highly."

So I was valued highly, was I?

By that violent *onmyouji*—how unexpected.

"You should start getting used to being praised. In the future, you're going to sell a hundred million copies of your manga, right?"

"A hundred million copies might be a bit too audacious to aim for... I'll be happy if I can sell even a million copies."

"You're saying something pretty crazy while pretending to sound humble, aren't you. At that level, I suppose I don't need to be worried about you being smothered with praise. ...As a professional, I have to confirm with you one more time, inelegant as it is to do so, but are you really going to go? You really might die if you do."

You may have gone through a survival lifestyle for two weeks, even if it wasn't on an uninhabited island, and you may have endured the venom of a *habu* snake without antivenom, but that could be just because of a series of coincidences, not because you're some chosen protagonist—said Ononoki-chan.

Coincidences.

Well, maybe.

Perhaps I really did just have good luck.

"They do say that luck is important in becoming a mangaka, though. So, instead of squandering all your luck here, you could try and hold onto it for future use."

"...I've considered myself as a person that's had extraordinarily good luck as well as extraordinarily bad luck, but I don't think I'm ever going to grow if I continue to rely on luck for everything."

Even if I had washed ashore onto Iriomote Island, not because I had been invited by Araundo-san, but because of dumb luck—if I had decided to give up the moment I found myself washed ashore, I wouldn't have gotten this far to realize it.

"I should look at it as not luck, but as probability. Even if there's only a one percent chance of me attaining my dream, if I stubbornly keep trying like some cursed snake, then one day, my dream will certainly come true."

"You've landed on a pretty nice way to word things, haven't you."

Though it sounds like a gacha game, said Ononoki-chan.

One with no ceiling, I guess?

"Then, for the sake of raising the probability by even the tiniest amount, I suppose I'll accompany you on your travels to collect material. Because someday, there might come an era where that won't be possible."

"Is that also something we should reference Volume 1 for?"

"All right, get on my back already. You're just making me wait with all this chatter. Or would you prefer it if I carried you?"

I'd prefer it if you didn't pamper me.

Thinking as much, I nestled my whole body against Ononoki-chan's small back—because she was a corpse doll, her back felt nice and cool, a very pleasant sensation.

"This is especially for you. I've never given onee-chan or *oni* onii-chan a piggyback ride before, you see."

Now that she'd said that—even though I'd always needed to cling to her torso, what exactly had changed her mind to put me on her back, instead?

"Surely we're not going to travel with 'Unlimited Rulebook', right? It's not so that this position makes it harder for me to fall off, right?"

"I wouldn't do anything to raise your chances of dying—it's better not to ride on airplanes if you're in poor condition. Do you think mountain paths are difficult for me? From here, we're going to go on foot, straight to Araundo Uroko's stronghold."

Feeling relieved, I asked,

"Even if she's not in some tree hollow, could Araundo-san be hiding away in some limestone cavern on some mountainside?

I promptly began to collect information.

If I had my smartphone with me, I would have wanted to record some voice memos—I felt like a member of some exploration party, looking for the evil lair lurking in a region yet to be explored.

"You know, like a cave of treasure hidden behind a waterfall—"

"I do want to see some limestone caverns and other caves, but let's save the sightseeing for after we're done."

"So you do plan on sightseeing in the end."

"I've already bragged about your escapades to *oni* onii-chan in Volume 1, saying that you'll be playing around in your

school swimsuit or wearing nothing but bloomers."

Why would you say something so thoughtless...

There was no need to brag that much.

"It was about your garb, after all.[133] So if you got that, please figure something out by the epilogue."

"What an unpleasant request..."

Don't just say, "if you got that".

It was too heavy of a quota for something I hadn't heard about until just now. I should've just taken sick leave. I had already performed some activities beyond that while stark naked, so please allow me to respectfully decline—but anyway.

"Then, is Araundo-san not hiding out in a limestone cavern? In that case, where on Iriomote Island could she be hiding—"

Even if it was a remote island, Iriomote Island was the second largest island after the main island of Okinawa. The area of the island was actually two hundred eighty-nine square kilometers. If a single human—I suppose I wasn't in the position to wonder if she could be called a human or not—was hidden here, I figured it would be quite the ordeal to find her. Especially if ninety percent of Iriomote Island was jungle.

Ninety percent...

"That's right. If we started searching the mountains without any idea, we'd probably just get double-stranded—however, there's no need to worry, Nade*kou*. Because we're not going mountain hunting, or even mountain climbing."

"Really?"

"In fact, we'll be escaping. We'll descend from the mountains, and we'll return to civilization."

Civilization?

In other words—the remaining ten percent of Iriomote Island?

"Because Araundo Uroko is staying at a resort hotel near Ohara Harbor."

"What the hell!?"

When I learned that the enemy boss was enjoying a luxurious stay at a resort hotel while I was withering away on the nudist beach, I thought I would black out right then and there, but considering I had been in a social position in which I could travel to Okinawa riding first class (though the plane did ultimately crash), I couldn't complain.

Still, I wanted to complain.

Well, even if she was a last boss that secluded herself from the world, she probably didn't want to live in any cruel environment, so she was free to choose whatever hideout she wanted... But I couldn't contain my urge to vent my anger at her.

The anger of Yamata no Orochi.[134]

"It's not like you were the eight-headed Yamata no Orochi. If anything, you were a hundred-thousand-headed snake, weren't you?"

"We don't need to talk about when I turned into Medusa. By the way, Ononoki-chan. Let's say that we'll come to terms with what happened to Kaiki-san in our own way—but how did the public react? A domestic flight crashing has to be a pretty serious incident, right?"

Of course, it would have been just as serious if it had been an international flight, but if the passenger list were made public, it would surely also come to light the bizarre way in which the seats had been reserved. Even if not for that, since I had not known the details of his theatrical scam, I had properly given my real name when I'd boarded, so the full name of "Sengoku Nadeko" had to be bouncing around TV and online news.

"True. Your weird name."

"Don't call my name weird!"

"Alas, I'm sure the sharp-eared Tsukihi-chan will be absolutely delighted... She'll probably go around saying, 'My dear old friend has died in an airplane crash! How pitiful I am!' or something."

"Your mental image of Araragi Tsukihi is terrible!"

Except she might actually say something like that.

I knew very well, because she was my dear old friend.

We could understand each other in a profound way.

"There's no need to worry. Although, that's only if you can even stop worrying, being able to understand a dear old

friend like that... According to some light research I did, apparently Gaen-san must have taken it into account from the beginning, since she had the news of the airplane crash covered up."

"She can do something like that? Covered up the news of an airplane crash."

Before, when I (and my alter ego) had run rampant at a bookstore in my hometown, she had completely covered up the disturbance without leaving so much as a trace... But how in the world did she suppress this aerial incident, which was being observed by radars across the world?

"Even if I were to die, news of my death might get covered up, too..."

"Hahahaha."

Yikes.

Ononoki-chan had just laughed... Though it had been with just her voice, without making any expression... Wasn't it the first time she'd laughed since *Nisemonogatari*? Was she trying to gloss over the matter by catching me by surprise...?

Was she trying to cover up the cover-up?

If anything, it was more likely that Gaen-san had done so to cover up the matter of Kaiki-san, her direct junior—but I was surprised to hear that even the top brass had taken all this into account, making me wonder, how much more accounting could they have done?

The onee-san that knew everything.

At this point, it was hard to know who was the real evil boss—which side was good, and which side was evil?

It was a theme I wanted to attempt to tackle in my manga.

"Just make it refreshing by sending all the bad guys flying. It's just manga, after all."

"Don't make light of manga. Because in manga, it can be refreshing even when the good guys get sent flying."

"So someone's going to be sent flying, regardless?"

Well, nowadays, that wasn't as common.

How long would depictions of extreme violence be allowed?—even as an aspiring mangaka who needed to defend manga, it was hard for me to say that I didn't have some concerns when I read manga from half a century ago.

Morality and ethics differed from era to era.

"Even without singling out any masterpieces from the past, there are plenty of insane things in the current era. From genres different from the manga that you idealize, plenty of *ero*

guro absurdist masterpieces."

"Of course there are... They're not necessarily only in different genres, either. When there is light, there is shadow, and when there is black, there is white—if I only fill my bookshelf with manga I like, there won't be any variation."

"Then, you're fine with not sending Araundo Uroko flying, right? You'll resolve things by talking it out."

"...Mm..."

Well, it was true that I didn't want to send her flying.

However, although I'd said that the curse cast upon me by my friends could be traced back to Kaiki-san's business, if we went back even further, the truth was that those curses had actually been let loose by Araundo-san.

If there was an unsatisfactory feeling from Ononoki-chan's professional mindset of not getting revenge for Kaiki-san, I could also say that it would feel a little unfair to peacefully talk things out without any ill will.

No matter how starved of conversation I was.

"I guess it would depend on the flow of things. But don't worry, I'm sure she won't curse you."

"Araundo would have to be pretty overemotional if she cursed me just by the flow of things... Although, curses might unexpectedly be like that."

Perhaps she'd lost interest in this fruitless discussion, as Ononoki-chan said, "Since we were talking about probability earlier, let me just say this," changing the subject choppily.

There was no shared context.

"It's pretty unlikely for this to happen, so I thought about just not mentioning it at all, but ultimately, I have the responsibility to explain things, and you have the right to know."

They're two sides of the same coin of freedom of expression.

So said Ononoki-chan—but what did she want to talk about?

What did she want to express?

"You remember what we talked about before?"

"Uhuhu. I remember everything you've told me, Ononoki-chan."

"Don't try to make a pass at me. If that's how you buttered yourself up for Tooboe Nakuna or Araragi Tsukihi, then I'll hold no sympathy for you—but, it's about the episode in which Gaen-san, in her university years, constructed a corpse doll (that is, me) with four of her underclassmen."

"Ah... I feel like you may have mentioned it, or maybe not..."

"I knew you'd be like that."

Gaen Izuko. Oshino Meme. Kaiki Deishuu. Kagenui Yozuru. And the last one was—Teori Tadatsuru, was it?

Right, right, I had recalled his name earlier when I'd been on the verge of death.

"At this point, it's hard to say how much of their independent research had actually been serious, but as a result, the corpse doll known as me was born, and the five university students were cursed—and most of the cursed university students ended up having to leave school."

"Huh... They had to leave school because they created you, Ononoki-chan?"

"They were pretty intense curses, after all. It was impossible to continue down the path of their studies while bearing those burdens. It might have been possible for Gaen-san, but as the leader, she took responsibility—if anything, onee-chan was the unusual one for somehow earning her doctorate while being unable to walk on the ground."

It wasn't exactly my place to say, considering I'd dropped out of school myself, but Kagenui-san really was abnormal, wasn't she... So she'd earned her doctorate, had she? You really couldn't judge someone based on their appearance or their personality or their behavior.

"If you decide to leave university midway, you'll end up like Oshino onii-chan or Kaiki onii-chan."

"That's something I absolutely would like to avoid."

"Of course, if there's someone that was particularly strongly influenced by those two, it would be Hanekawa Tsubasa, who abandoned her studies."

"What terrible influences they are."

So, what exactly was the point of reviewing this information?

Was it a check to see if I had only been pretending to pay attention in my chats with Ononoki-chan? It was something Nakuna-chan and Tsukihi-chan often did.

"The two of them would intentionally repeat the same topic to test their friends' loyalty."

"Did they really consider them friends? No, that's not it... Well, those university students were able to settle into the curses affecting their bodies, and it seems as though everyone has found ways to deal with it—one of them was even able to forcibly lift the curse by falling to hell."

Well, even if she said “one of them”.

By process of elimination, it could only be Teori Tadatsuru-san.

“It was like a chronic disease, so to speak, and nobody really minds anymore. So, I’m only bringing this up now to serve as a reference—Sengoku Nadeko.”

“Um… Uh, yes.”

The passenger list hadn’t been publicized in the end, but being called by my full name always made me a little nervous. Especially when it was from Ononoki-chan, who rarely used it. Though I felt a little weird about growing accustomed to being called Nade*kou*.

“This time, even though you didn’t do so intentionally from what I understand, you were able to revive me from my watery grave—in other words, you ‘resurrected a corpse that had died’. It’s possible that this action could end up being a violation of the rules.”

“The—the rules?”

“Going against the natural way of things. Basically…”

You might end up becoming cursed.

By something.

“God only knows if my revival will be treated as just the repair of a doll, or if it will be treated as an actual rebirth—presumably, Gaen-san and Kaiki onii-chan put you as the focal point of their plan because they assumed it would be treated as a repair, but they are two out of the five people that had failed once before.”

If she was saying that, then I had failed not once, but plenty of times—I’d assumed my actions had been an extension of what I’d done to Ononoki-chan’s broken-up corpse at the Kitashirahebi Shrine, when I’d put her back together like a puzzle. But, according to Ononoki-chan, my actions might be on the same level as the actions of the five occultist university students.

In the first place, there was already the question of if the Ononoki-chan sent to her watery grave and the Ononoki-chan revived by my “drawing” were in fact the same person—or rather, the same doll. It was essentially the philosophical zombie problem.

Was she the real zombie, or the philosophical zombie?

If I was judged to have created a new corpse doll from scratch out of that star sand—then there was no way I wouldn’t end up cursed.

I would become an accursed girl.

"Th-then, will I become unable to walk on the ground, like Kagenui-san?"

Was that why she was carrying me on her back? Would Ononoki-chan ultimately support me with a single finger? Although that was partly possible due to Kagenui-san's own physical ability.

"Or, like Gaen-san, will all sorts of knowledge be forcibly crammed into my brain?—or, like Kaiki-san, will I end up only being able to tell lies?—or, like Oshino-san, will I keep losing my place of residence?"

"Since the five of them committed the violation together, the curse was split into five equal parts, but in your case, you did it all on your own. So it's possible you'll take on the full curse."

What a shock.

Why was this happening to me... There was no way I'd be able to deal with the curses, which were split across those five specialists, all on my own.

It was a massive defeat that was too heavy to handle.

"It could bring even a professional to shame. Or perhaps, you could be hit by a completely different curse. Like something that would prevent you from ever drawing again."

"You're coming up with an even more terrifying possibility..."

"Or maybe, you might still be able to draw, but no manga you draw will ever be interesting."

She was saying it jokingly, but it sounded completely horrific to me... At this stage, it was just a cautionary mention of a potential drawback, but still, it was a warning I absolutely needed to keep in mind.

When I returned, it would probably be good to have Gaen-san perform a detailed investigation—although, if Gaen-san had taken all of this into account when she dispatched me to Iriomote Island, then perhaps I should be seeking a second opinion from outside the Gaen faction.

Going against the natural way of things—to play with life as one pleased certainly seemed like a grave sin. So this was where Kagenui-san's roots lay, as a specialist in immortal oddities.

Kagenui-san, the only one to have graduated from university without deviating from her path...

"...In the first place, why did those five people decide to make you, Ononoki-chan, anyway?"

"That's the same as asking why you draw manga."

"And by that, you mean?"

"Half for fun."

How rude... Was what I wanted to say, but from an extreme standpoint, it was probably harder for me to find a reason for the half that wasn't "for fun". As someone who'd thought only about wanting to draw, even when on the verge of starving to death—in other words, it was with that much zeal and passion that those five university students decided to manufacture Ononoki-chan.

Back when those specialists hadn't been anybody in particular.

"That's right. It's possible that those five are, even now, still searching for the other half that isn't just 'for fun'. However, if we consider the new information learned from Kaiki onii-chan on the plane, we might be able to come up with an additional part of the motive for the ringleader, Gaen-san—perhaps I was meant to be a substitute for her daughter."

"....."

"Much like how she's currently projecting her daughter onto you, I have a theory that that boss had once projected her daughter onto me. Perhaps we could even call it her youthful indiscretion—if so, then like how onee-chan once projected her real younger sister, who was killed and eaten by the fangs of an immortal oddity, onto me, I could only be a project ending in failure."

She was casually revealing a new backstory, wasn't she.

Was it because this was the end?

A real younger sister—and a real daughter.

"Though I was a fake younger sister, and a fake daughter. That's the reason I first appeared in *Nisemonogatari*."

"That explanation was obviously made up after the fact, though?"

"It's true that onee-chan projected her real younger sister onto me in the past, but I'm not being too thorough about my speculations about Gaen-san. I'd called it a theory, but that theory is full of holes. Or even hollows. It might even be more appropriate to consider it as it being practice for today, this very day."

With Ononoki-chan saying that, we finally broke out of the rugged part of the jungle—there was still some distance left in front of us, but I was finally able to see some paved roads.

Roads. Cars. And a town...

The first man-made object I was seeing in two weeks...

Well, no, if Ononoki-chan was considered man-made,

then I had long since laid my eyes on her already, and the uniform I'd created was also man-made. Even so, the sight before me left me was so emotionally moving. It made sense for a starry sky, but to think I'd find myself moved by seeing people's houses...

"In order to one day overthrow her real daughter that she'd abandoned, she manufactured a fake daughter together with her loyal underclassmen, steadily preparing for the parent-child confrontation that she would one day have to face —and, having found the ideal courtroom sketch artist in you, she resolved to face her."

I see. It did seem like something Gaen-san would do.

Though it didn't seem like something a mother would do.

021

The resort hotel that Araundo Uroko-san had made her stronghold was even more of a resort hotel than I had imagined. It easily surpassed my level of imagination, as well as my resolve. Not to mention, it wasn't a high-rise building you'd find in a big city, but more like an entire wealthy neighborhood, where each guest could stay in their own cottage-like boathouse—from swimming in the ocean to barbecues, scuba diving to riding water buffaloes, and even flyboarding, all of it could be done within hotel grounds, like one massive amusement park.

"Wh-while I was sleeping in the sand on the back side of this island, there was such a fancy resort in the front..."

I couldn't keep my body from trembling, even more so than when I'd been suffering from the *habu* venom. What had it all been for, that endless pitching practice for the sake of setting off a single spark... Even though there was a baseball field right here.

I could throw as much as I wanted.

"No need to coil yourself up in so much resentment, when you're going to sell a million copies in the future. Regardless, once you start earning tons of money in the future, the manga you draw will end up becoming less convincing."

"You're already disparaging me about what'll happen after I start selling..."

"Or maybe you might actually become more convincing. By earning a ton of money, you might get a real understanding of the idea that not everything revolves around money."

"I don't need to earn a ton of money to really understand what that means."

I absolutely wanted to hear Kaiki-san's opinion, as someone who valued money over everything, who boasted about how much he loved money, but it was only the two of us, Ononoki-chan and me, who had arrived at this hotel.

The two of us, who had lived through that survival experience.

"All right, let's get going. I thought we left with plenty of time to spare, but it looks like we're going to be late for our appointment."

"You scheduled an appointment? For our showdown against the last boss?"

"Yep. She told us to let her know when we were getting

close."

Wasn't that exactly why our plane had ended up crashing? But Ononoki-chan had in fact been sending out a message with her kids' phone once we'd reached a zone where she was getting reception... So that was what it was for.

Was there something like a gentleman's agreement between specialists?

Or, a ritual.

In the past, I'd performed a kind of ritual in a school swimsuit...

"This hotel has a spa, doesn't it? Would it be a bad idea if we went and took a bath before the meeting?"

"Oh my. That's something Shizuka-chan would say."[135]

"It's not just for the sake of etiquette. I may have taken sand baths and dove into cold water, but unfortunately, my body's been stained with the two-week pseudo-uninhabited-island lifestyle to the level that the hotel might prevent me from entering."

"What, you think they'll say something like, 'This hotel is not open to the general public'?"

Was this place that high of a hotel?

High in both class and in price.

Incidentally, my empty stomach, which had only been appeased with small fish, had been making me suffer almost as much as the venom had, but as we were crossing the mountains, Ononoki-chan had me eat some *sata andagi* as provisions.

I was very grateful, but that had to mean that, before she came to save me, she'd dropped by somewhere to buy those.

"Just ask Araundo if you can use her shower."

"Is there anyone that would ask the last boss to use their shower?"

"She has a pretty good room, so there's probably even a nice bathtub with a jacuzzi. I've heard if you get the suite, it even comes with a small island."

"A small island?"

Rather than having a spa.

This hotel was just super.[136]

"It's like an uninhabited island, which you love so much. The private beach is popular with celebrities, apparently. And popular with snake charmers, too."

"It really isn't very convincing to hear that someone living at this beach resort was scattering such gloomy and malicious curses everywhere..."

Not that I was saying she should be living in a tree hollow.

Instead of "gap *moe*", it was like "gap wilting", instead.[137]

"She's just some pampered princess. But oh well, we may as well go off of Uchinaa time.[138] They probably won't let you use the spa, but if you ask the front desk, they might allow you to use the showers by the pool, even if you're not a guest—at least for this year."

Again and again, she kept hinting at something from Volume 1.

Realistically, with my current fragrance, it wouldn't be weird if a hotel with minus three stars turned me away at the door (may as well bottle it up and sell it as perfume), but perhaps there had been some benefit in wearing my middle school uniform, or perhaps hospitality was the standard in this first-class hotel, for they readily allowed me to use one of their shower rooms.

In the meantime, Ononoki-chan bought me a change of clothes at the gift shop—I could have easily produced a second outfit using my "Skill of Snake Legs", but it seemed she wanted to contribute to local businesses.

Right, it would feel bad if I ended things just by putting a burden on the environment through my survival life—I staked my life to do whatever I could to survive, like catching fish or breaking rocks or starting an open-air fire, because I thought it was an uninhabited island, but if that was deemed the same as tourists destroying nature for their own commemorative photos, I would not be able to refute it.

You couldn't really blame a middle school girl too much for breaking rocks while on the verge of death, but no matter what, I was glad I didn't do any harm to the coral reef...

What Ononoki-chan bought for me was a *kariyushi* shirt.

I was fulfilling one of the plans I had made on the plane—though I would've liked to see Kaiki-san in a *kariyushi*, too. For our meeting with the last boss, my school uniform probably would have been stronger as combat gear, but if it was possible to resolve things just by talking it out, then it was probably better to change clothes into the local style, in the spirit of reconciliation. Well, it was at least better than being stark naked.

Ononoki-chan also changed into her own *kariyushi*.

It was impressive that she had even crossed the mountain in that frilly layered skirt.

Interspersing a shower and a change of clothes, two fanservice scenes that couldn't even really be called fanservice at this point, we finally marched into Araundo Uroko's stronghold—the resort hotel's suite, the boathouse with its own island.

Sure enough.

"Heya, you've really kept me waiting, Nadeko-chan—I've been up to my neck in anticipation for this meeting.[139] Although, I'm a snake, so it's like my entire body is a neck—ahaha,"

she said.

We were greeted by Araundo Uroko—ah, of course.

It all made sense.

So that's how it was.

It would have been meaningless to try to hide it, I thought to myself, in full understanding.

Rather, if he hadn't led with that revelation from the very beginning, it might have made me panic even more... I'd stubbornly clung to the possibility that it had been one of Kaiki-san's vicious lies—if anything, I'd rated that possibility as far more likely—but that hadn't been the case at all.

If he hadn't given us that preface, I probably wouldn't have known what to think about this girl before my eyes, who I could even describe as being Gaen-san herself.

They were alike, to a terrifying degree.

They were almost exactly the same.

I even wondered if they were doppelgangers—and yet, unlike the alter egos that had been born from me, unlike Gentle Nadeko and Anti-Nadeko and Divine Nadeko, it was different from that sort of resemblance. It really did feel like the resemblance between parent and child, and there was no way I could mistake one for the other.

It was impossible to suspect that there had been some replacement trick, or the same person playing both roles.

I felt the same uncomfortable feeling as I'd felt on parents' day at school, in this luxurious and open area in the southern lands—the same uncomfortable feeling as when I greeted the family of my friend when I went to play at my friend's house.

Of course, this experience was referring to when I went to play at Tsukihi-chan's house—when I went to play at Tsukihi-chan's house, and I met Tsukihi-chan's mother and sister—and her brother.

That sort of unpleasant feeling.

She had a character design that made me think that Gaen Izuko-san probably looked like this when she was fifteen—I couldn't help but gulp.

However, just as there had been with the family of my friend, I couldn't deny the overwhelming differences.

First, as mentioned before, their ages were different.

No matter how young Gaen-san looked, looking at her daughter like this made me realize that that person really was a proper adult—the Araundo-san in front of me, reclining deeply into a woven rattan chair, was certainly a fifteen-year-old girl, from the same generation as me.

And, her four limbs.

Extending from a thin nightgown that really gave off the impression of a resort hotel, her four limbs—were completely covered with scales.

Like a snake.

Her legs, which could be called snake legs, were covered in scales.

Araundo—Uroko.[140]

"And you are the doll created by my mama, right? How cute."

Araundo-san had spoken to the *kariyushi*-clad Ononoki-chan by my side—no, she had taken a step in front of me, and I could tell in spite of her blank expression that she was prepared for battle.

Gaen-san had always used the same tone of voice when speaking to Ononoki-chan.

"Speaking of which, have you ever thought about why Mama decided to create you?"

"What a coincidence. I was actually thinking about it just now."

Ononoki-chan responded in a calm monotone—just as she would have, if Gaen-san had been the one to pose that question.

"I'm a doll bomb that was prepared as an assassin to take care of you today, on this very day."

Ononoki-chan did not bring up the theory that she was meant as a substitute for Gaen-san's daughter—and Araundo-san said, "What a shrewd way to view things. Could you perhaps be in your rebellious phase?" and continued to grin.

Rather than just showing off how calm she was, it was as though the shape of her face was always like that.

"Even though it's an extremely common thing, in any culture across the world, for a mother to give their cute

daughter a cute little doll as a gift."

"....."

Ononoki-chan was silent.

Not even I had thought of something like that—even though I myself had received tons of stuffed toys as gifts by my overprotective parents.

Because I myself had basically been one of my parents' stuffed toys.

"Well, as a wicked snake, it's not like I haven't thought of the possibility that she intentionally committed a taboo to obtain the curse of omniscience—in other words, the possibility that she committed the sin with the goal of receiving the punishment. If so, it wouldn't be an impossible crime, but her succeeding in the perfect crime. Now, Nadeko-chan. Is it okay if I call you Nadeko-chan?"

"...Yes, if you'd like."

It wasn't particularly pleasant for her to act so over-familiar with me, but I couldn't find a reason to refuse—I was pretty weak against people who came on strong. Like Gaen-san, like Nakuna-chan, like Tsukihi-chan—thinking about it, I was basically surrounded by that type of person, wasn't I?

It was the terrifying situation in which, after constantly running away from those I could run away from, the only ones left around me were the strong enemies I could not run away from.

"Unlike Yotsugi-chan, I suppose I shouldn't call you cute, even as lip service. I mean, with the way you two are standing in front of me, I really do think of you as cute, not just out of politeness... But it seems you would hate to hear that. Besides, right now, you are more than just cute—you're very strong-willed."

Seems like you've gotten to enjoy the attractions I prepared for you—said Araundo-san.

"Of course, any shut-in would be forced to become strong-willed if they were placed in a two-week survival situation... But, as expected, me becoming a castaway—my ordeals—they were all planned by you, weren't they?"

"Even though it took such great pains for us to meet, you don't need to be so distant with me. Call me Uroko-chan."

Araundo-san winked, as if feigning ignorance.

She seemed rather good-natured, to the degree that I couldn't think of her as a wicked snake.

But, since she was a girl from the same generation as me, it was hard for me to know how I should behave—I was bad

with girls from my generation. In the first place, I was never all that sociable to begin with. I couldn't possibly show poise in a first meeting like this.

Also, I couldn't keep my eyes from being drawn to Araundo-san's arms and legs, which made it hard to focus on the conversation—her arms and legs covered with scales.

When I'd been cursed by a snake, its scale marks had been left pressed into my body—but in Araundo-san's case, it was clear that they weren't just marks. The scales were actually "growing" from her body.

"Ah, these? Don't worry about these. It's basically the result of the phrase, 'If you curse someone, dig two graves'. These are just the retaliation from repeatedly cursing complete strangers for fifteen years."

If so, I suppose I could think of her as the same as the hospitalized Nakuna-chan, whose body had become riddled with holes, thus suffering more than me—of course, the reason for Nakuna-chan's suffering was Araundo-san herself.

The origin of the curse.

The waterfall lake of the charms.

"Putting that aside, congratulations. This marks the completion of your training, Nadeko-chan. Managing to arrive to my location means that you are now a fully-fledged specialist."

"...Are you trying to say that that mistaken survival experience was actually meant to be the final exam in my training?"

Perhaps my irritation had come out in my words—as long as my Anti-Nadeko personality didn't come out to the forefront, I had considered myself to be not so hot-tempered, but it seemed I couldn't hold that part of me back.

It would be pretty malicious if she was making fun of me, but it would be even more malicious if it was true.

I would probably feel better if I'd fallen victim to a scam.

I was even hit with the impulse to move out of the apartment that Gaen-san had introduced me to, settling for a sand futon as a bed—no, it would be impossible to use a sand futon for the rest of my life.

But—that was just training?

"No need to make such a fuss. If you're wondering if Mama and I colluded behind the scenes to ensure your rapid growth, Nadeko-chan, then that's certainly not the case—there'd be no need to meet beforehand, after all."

"……?"

"Right, if we're talking about behind the scenes, then there certainly was a back side. If this Iriomote Island survival life was training for Nadeko-chan, then the back side would be that this was karma for Mama."

Karma?

I glanced in Ononoki-chan's direction—in the same way she'd known that Kaiki-san had reserved the entire plane, I was asking with my eyes if this corpse doll had any knowledge of what Araundo-san was talking about right now.

Of course, I only got a blank expression in response.

However, from that blank expression, Ononoki-chan eloquently said, "I dunno anything about that"—so I was going to believe her.

"...Can you explain a little more? Araundo-san—"

"I'd like it if you called me Uroko-chan,"

said the last boss.

I had once been referred to as the last boss behind the scenes, but in the end, a real last boss's personality was different—it would be a trivial matter to refer to Araundo-san as Uroko-chan instead, but that triviality was what was so hard to accept in this situation.

I'd learned from my survival life—what Araundo-san referred to as training—that anything accomplished trivially could amount to nothing more than trivial accomplishments. Putting in the effort for something that was still unattainable—now that was a true accomplishment, and the correct answer.[141]

Even though setting off the smallest spark of a fire required labor on the level of destroying my shoulder, it was hard for me to so trivially enter into the parent-child relationship between Gaen-san and Araundo-san.

Because an inexperienced person like me boarded the first class of a plane paid for by a con man, that plane ended up falling into the ocean—as Oshino-san would put it, it was an appropriate compensation.

Oddities.

Had their own appropriate reasons.

However, that didn't mean I had any information to offer for an equivalent exchange. Information, money, resources, I had none of those—no, there was something.

There was something I did have—the snake legs, that only I was capable of.

My own bit of self-sufficiency.

"...Ah, I see. So that's it."

At that moment, I suddenly realized.

The reason I'd come to Iriomote Island—Kaiki-san said that Gaen-san had dispatched the three of us to figure out why Araundo Uroko had made this island her base, and I had simply taken that as fact.

At the very least, it made perfect sense to me that she wouldn't expect a team of outlaws, consisting of a con man and a trainee and a person facing discipline, to overthrow the enemy boss.

However—perhaps that hadn't been it at all.

Like how Kaiki-san and Ononoki-chan had things that only they could do—I had something that only I could do, didn't I? Something that only Sengoku Nadeko could do.

In that case.

"...I understand, Uroko-chan,"

I said.

If it was like this, then there was nothing hard about referring to Araundo-san as Uroko-chan—I could treat the "chan" suffix as a consumption tax for my living necessities.

"In exchange, I'd like it if you could prepare some things for me, Uroko-chan. Is that all right?"

"Of course. I've inherited Mama's stance that I should always listen to a request from a friend. What should I get ready for you—a talisman for a curse?"

"Paper and pen."

I responded without hesitation—that one set, which I would unwaveringly choose if I could bring only one thing with me to an uninhabited island.

It could just as easily be a stick in the sand, or water on a boulder, but ultimately, paper and pen was what I was most comfortable with—even more so if it was manuscript paper and a spoon nib pen.

"? It's true that this might be a pretty long talk, but it's not so difficult that you'll need to take notes, you know?"

Uroko-chan tilted her head to the side in confusion—rather, she raised her head.

Needless to say, in the way a snake would.

"It pains me as a loving daughter to say that, before I can talk about my mama, I first have to talk about my aunt.

"You know of her, right?

"Gaen Tooe.

"Gaen Izuko's older sister, Kanbaru Suruga's mother, and Kaiki Deishuu's private tutor—you can tell she's no ordinary person just from that description, but that wasn't even half the story. She was even greater of a personage than described.

"I don't know if I could call her an adult, but she was certainly a personage.[142]

"It is truly regrettable that she has departed from this world.

"But, as Kaiki Deishuu might say, she has even taught us the harsh lesson that not even a great person can win against illness or traffic accidents—not even the Iriomote cat can be protected from becoming roadkill. I'm sure this is something you, Nadeko-chan, are fully aware of, having experienced an airplane crash of your own.

"No, no, this isn't just small talk.

"It's a completely serious ghost story.

"In the end, the sisterly link between Mama and my aunt was inseparable, even when separated—Mama probably feels ashamed about this, but if you had an outstanding, stoic, overpowered, cheat-like older sister, of course you would end up feeling some sort of complex as her younger sister.

"And Gaen Izuko was no exception.

"How do I explain it to you, Nadeko-chan, who's an only child and has only seen the Fire Sisters, who had Araragi Koyomi for their older brother? From your point of view, Nadeko-chan, you might have been able to observe that Mama was someone who couldn't fully become an adult, wild and childish, and even a bit hateful of a person. But that behavior of hers could just naturally be seen as a poor reflection of her deceased older sister.

"And it was inevitable that I would inherit that same personality—there were certain circumstances that forced me to inherit that personality, which I am going to explain to you now. The circumstances that caused me to become a reflection of my mama.

"Unlike Mama, I'm not some 'onee-san that knows

everything', but as compensation, I'll be a 'daughter that knows everything'.

"'If it's about Mama'.

"Then I'm a 'daughter that knows everything'.

"I'm aware that it wasn't very appropriate to bring up Araragi Koyomi's name in front of you, Nadeko-chan, but there's a certain order I have to follow, so you'll have to put up with me—oh, so it doesn't bother you anymore?

"You really have grown. Perhaps it's the result of your training.

"Or—you've already moved past it long before that.

"Maybe the experience of confronting your four alter egos was beneficial for you, Nadeko-chan—I envy you, as a daughter that's prevented from confronting Mama.

"I envy the fact you were raised up.

"Anyway.

"Nadeko-chan, how deeply are you knowledgeable about the relationship between Araragi Koyomi and Oshino Ougi, or perhaps the relationship between Kanbaru Suruga and Oshino Ougi?

"As a high school girl, Oshino Ougi was Araragi Koyomi's back side, and as a high school boy, Oshino Ougi was Kanbaru Suruga's back side. But if I have to start explaining from there, then I will need you to stay for a night in this cottage—I hope it's fine if I drastically cut that part short.

"Rather than referencing Volume 1, you'll have to reference the volumes before that.

"Though you'll need to go in with the same enthusiasm as rewatching the entire Marvel Cinematic Universe.

"What's important here is that Oshino Ougi's very being was strongly influenced by Gaen Tooe's existence—I believe Kanbaru Suruga told you herself that, the night you were lifting the curse cast upon you by your friend, her left arm was actually that of a monkey's.

"The fact that she can so casually bring up her circumstances to a girl she'd just met is yet another reason Kanbaru Suruga is Gaen Tooe's daughter, but anyway.

"That monkey's left hand—that mummified left hand. Have you already heard that it originated from Gaen Tooe? The domestic, private matter of the left hand having been a memento of her mother.

"Strictly speaking, it was not the left hand of a monkey, but the left hand of a devil.

"The Rainy Devil.

“A crybaby devil.

“And, even more strictly speaking, this Rainy Devil, who would ‘grant the underside of any wish’, was an oddity born from Gaen Tooe when she was a high school girl.

“My aunt in her youth was the embodiment of greed.

“The hidden side of my otherwise flawless aunt—it must sound like a familiar theme for you, Nadeko-chan, as someone who holds four alter egos. You know, it’s ‘the same as usual’. Like a self-portrait, or a likeness, or an abstract painting—or perhaps I should call it a disparaging picture aimed towards oneself. But of all things, for her to bring forth the Rainy Devil from within herself... There really was something wrong with my aunt.

“Ultimately, my aunt exterminated that oddity—a swift decision. There had to be a limit to how stoic one could be... But my aunt was strict on herself. And it was quite the abnormal action for her to leave a part of her alter ego, which had shriveled up as if it had spent time on an uninhabited island, to her daughter.

“Even though it was nothing like an umbilical cord.

“What could my aunt have been thinking?—leaving the devil’s left hand to Kanbaru Suruga, who was technically my cousin, remained a mystery even now, but to sum it up, that left hand’s essence made its way to Araragi Koyomi through Shishirui Seishirou, and finally produced Oshino Ougi.

“Oshino Ougi, the reverse side of Araragi Koyomi.

“Unlike my aunt, he chose not to exterminate Oshino Ougi, who was a manifestation of his obligations—and, with Oshino Ougi now being returned to Kanbaru Suruga, I’m very interested in seeing what she’ll do from now on.

“I’m sure she’ll be able to find an answer before her high school graduation—with the matter of Numachi Rouka, the collection of the remaining mummy parts, and the trouble with the girls’ basketball club, it seemed her third year of high school had been filled with just as much drama as Araragi Koyomi’s had.

“Well, regardless of that situation.

“It’s of little importance to you, Nadeko-chan, who has retired from the flow of those tales. When you had become enshrined as a snake god, Nadeko-chan, that was basically the consequences of your own actions, after all. It’s hard to say it was Oshino Ougi’s fault.

“However, if the Rainy Devil, the back side of my aunt, had ended up becoming the indirect cause of many tales in the

future generation, there is no way that it wouldn't have had any influence on Gaen Izuko, her real younger sister, right?

"When her real younger sister watched as my aunt gave birth to her alter ego—or rather, gave birth to her own self—Mama was still an impressionable young woman who could not remain impassive.

"She could not be separated.

"Mama hadn't always been an 'onee-san'—but she had been a younger sister since she was born.

"You've figured it out, haven't you? Or maybe, you don't want to figure it out.

"Basically, I am to Gaen Izuko what the Rainy Devil is to Gaen Tooe, what Oshino Ougi is to Araragi Koyomi or Kanbaru Suruga, or what Gentle Nadeko, Anti-Nadeko, Fawning Nadeko, and Divine Nadeko were to you, Nadeko-chan. The back to the front, and the front to the back.

"The hard survival life, to the luxurious resort life.

"And it's not wrong to say it was like the younger sister to the older sister, and the older sister to the younger sister—however, unfortunately, I couldn't become Mama's younger sister.

"Though that would have been best.

"If Oshino Ougi was a manifestation of Araragi Koyomi's obligations, then Araundo Uroko was a manifestation of the young Gaen Izuko's inferiority complex towards her sister.

"However, if I had become Mama's younger sister, that would have been equivalent to becoming my aunt's younger sister, as well—and so, instead of becoming my older sister, Mama instead became my mother.

"And I became Mama's unforgivable daughter.

"The unforgivable daughter of my teenage mama.

"Needless to say, she was also influenced by my aunt having actually given birth a few years before I'd been born—perhaps that had had an even stronger influence than the Rainy Devil.

"Her older sister gave birth to Kanbaru Suruga and became a mother. There was no way that my own birth was unrelated to that.

"Just as her older sister had become a mother.

"She must have thought that she herself needed to become a mother.

"Her older sister, who she aspired to become. Her role model.

"Quite literally, a private tutor.[143]

"As someone who copied everything her older sister did, saying that the little sister went through a false pregnancy and a fantastical birth might be an overstatement. But these events occurred long before Mama realized that the correct thing to do was to follow a different path from her sister.

"Before she realized that her outstanding sister should not be her private tutor, but a bad example to learn from.[144]

"Of course, unlike my aunt, the fact that Mama gave birth not to herself but to a daughter when placed in the same position, she had already been on the fence—and so, I had crossed from being an inferiority complex, into a curse.

"Perhaps Mama thought she could have copied her outstanding sister and stoically carried out the extermination. But if I was her daughter, that wasn't so simple—and, in a whirlpool of love and hate, this situation went on, leaving behind a trail for fifteen years.

"Like a snake.

"To be honest, I thought she was no longer acknowledging me as a daughter, so I was quite shocked when I heard that Mama was trying to settle things after all this time.

"It made me think, 'Seriously?'

"I thought she was going to remain evasive, keeping me at an appropriate distance, for the rest of our lives—I thought she'd evaluated that that was the balance she needed to keep, as a specialist.

"In the same way Oshino Meme, a balancer, was fussy about maintaining that balance, I needed to continue casting curses, so Mama's superior capabilities did not become disproportionally unfair.

"Friendship, romance, education, coworkers, sports, hobbies, economics, necessities of life, news, passage of time, conservation of nature, gossip, urban legends, social interactions.

"Monstrous apparitions, evil spirits, the night parade of a hundred demons.

"I had no choice but to keep cursing them.

"If Mama was going to help others, then I needed to do the opposite—like how Mama should be going the opposite way from my aunt.

"That was how I kept the balance.

"No—I was like ballast water.

"If you can't be medicine, then be poison. Otherwise, you're nothing but water.

"That was my aunt's favorite saying.

“However, I’m sure you’ve realized over the past two weeks, Nadeko-chan, how important water actually is.

“In order for Mama to become the boss of the specialists, I needed to be the boss of the snakes—I was a daughter with no filial piety, and too much filial piety, all at once. As long as I existed, Mama would not sink.

“An unsinkable aircraft carrier.[145]

“And so, like magnetic repulsion, Mama made no attempt to approach her daughter in a constant rebellious phase—even though realistically, it would have been very easy for her to do so.

“If you ask me, it was a fixed game with eight hundred lies,[146] a rigged race that was too well-rigged[147]—and perhaps, because of that guilt, she came up with the idea of producing the teddy bear of you, Ononoki-chan.

“What I’d said earlier wasn’t totally in jest. In order to maintain a reasonable distance from me without any near-misses, Mama had no choice but to become the ‘onee-san that knew everything’—you could say she was unable to become the ‘mother that knew everything’, and therefore, she had no choice to try her hand at forbidden magic.

“And that’s how Mama renounced her childcare duties for fifteen years—but that was fine. It’s much too arrogant to insist that one must always face their complexes.

“Especially so if the target of that complex were to become deceased—in order for Mama to become the boss of the specialists, she needed to cast her inferiority complex away from her.

“And yet, here we are in this showdown.

“Perhaps she had a change of heart.

“The fact that Araragi Koyomi did not exterminate Oshino Ougi likely served as the trigger—for Mama, that demise had been a sort of proxy war. Because she’d failed to settle things with me, she gave Araragi Koyomi her support—but she had completely missed the mark.

“Instead of settling things, Araragi Koyomi opted for the route in which he would rescue Oshino Ougi.

“This was an option that didn’t exist in Mama’s worldview. She’d probably pretended to be calm, but it would have come as quite the culture shock. The way of thinking of the new generation.

“The ethics of the new generation.

“Though I don’t think she ever thought that she could learn from Araragi Koyomi’s example. Putting aside his

personality and his proclivities, there's no way an adult could learn anything from a teenager. And she had her reputation to uphold.

"Not to mention, when she tried to approach him to win him over to her team, they ended up cutting ties, instead... From the point of view of her daughter, I don't think there's anyone in the world capable of forming a respectable relationship with Araragi Koyomi.

"I'm sure you can sympathize with that, Nadeko-chan.

"Ononoki-chan, too.

"Basically, Mama's scheme to make Araragi Koyomi one of her own ended in failure, but beyond anyone's expectations, the one to remain on that stage was none other than Sengoku Nadeko. An end where the remaining players profited.

"Perhaps her original plan had been to take Araragi Koyomi, who had ended up protecting Oshino Ougi, and meticulously train him in combat before assigning him to me... Dear me, from the point of view of her daughter, it was quite the terrifying plan.

"Normally, would you ever assign Araragi Koyomi to your fifteen-year-old daughter?

"It was a form of abuse that I'd never heard of before.

"When that plan ended up at a standstill, I couldn't tell you how relieved I felt—of course, I had to acknowledge that I, Araundo Uroko, wouldn't be able to put up any resistance against the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire and Oddity Slayer, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.

"In reality, the moment that Mama began rating you highly, Nadeko-chan, was when you ended up intentionally drawing four alter egos of yourself—the keyword here being 'intentionally'.

"After all, that was not even something that her outstanding sister, Gaen Tooe, could do—like how I had been an unwanted child for Mama, and how neither Araragi Koyomi nor Kanbaru Suruga had produced Oshino Ougi intentionally.

"That power of imagination.

"As well as that power of portrayal, those really were something to be valued highly—there's no need for you to be humble or deprecate yourself.

"It's something you should take pride in, to an almost tasteless level.

"Mama never once projected me on to you, Nadeko-chan—if anything, it was the reverse. To her daughter, who she hadn't met for the longest time and renounced childcare duties

for, she was scouting you not to cast a shadow, but a light.

"Of course, in order for this to happen, you first needed to be trained. Unlike Araragi Koyomi, you couldn't be sent before Araundo Uroko as a completely raw ingredient. Not with just your own body.

"Thus, she needed to raise you.

"Unlike her real daughter, but like her real daughter, she needed to raise you by her own hand.

"Sometimes strict, sometimes kind, sometimes keeping her on you, sometimes pushing you away.

"It brings up the question of who was assigned to whom, doesn't it? Was Nadeko-chan assigned to me, or did I end up being assigned to Nadeko-chan—rather than the relationship between the *habu* snake and the mongoose, this was more like the relationship between two *habu* snakes.

"Like a safety rope tying us together in a way that couldn't be undone.

"What kind of a god of matchmaking was this?

"Now do you understand? That was what I really meant by training, Nadeko-chan. In order for Mama to make up for her karma in me—to make up for and subdue me, she needed you, Nadeko-chan, to awaken.[148]

"She needed to awaken you.

"And so, Nadeko-chan, that's how you ended up here, in front of me—in front of my snake eyes. Namely, you're completing the required course for specialists that was set by Gaen Izuko.

"So, I wanted to congratulate you.

"As the ruler of curses, I couldn't stand by without praising you.

"Because you are now a splendid specialist, acknowledged by Mama—a daughter that has gained her recognition, unlike me. They say that raising a child is like raising yourself, so by raising you, Nadeko-chan, even Mama herself might have gotten some improvement—it's a story of salvation where even adults can experience growth. And, as her inadequate daughter, along with my blessings, I'd also like to say some words of gratitude.

"Thank you, Nadeko-chan.

"For saving Mama.

"By meeting me like this, your work is now completely done, with nothing being overlooked—it's impressive that a girl who was but one of my sacrifices, a girl who amounted to little more than one of my scales, made it this far.

“Without yielding to temptation, without being conceited by divinity, without falling to ruin, without fearing tribulations, without feeling shame for past transgressions, without brushing off your sins, without showing hatred for lack of understanding, without cursing your fate.

“Without being poisoned by a snake.

“You made it this far, to me.

“You reached your own heart.

“Overcoming your past self, your present self, and even your future self.

“A great achievement that Gaen Tooe, Gaen Izuko, and even Araragi Koyomi were unable to do—clap clap clap clap.

“Sengoku Nadeko has become a specialist.

“Now, all you need to do is become a mangaka.”

023

The epilogue.

Three years later, at the age of eighteen, I began preparations to move to the capital and leave the apartment introduced to me by Gaen-san behind—and this time, I wasn't just referring to setting out for the prefectural capital as "moving to the capital" for fun. It was the actual capital.

I was heading for Japan's capital, Tokyo.

Nothing had been officially announced yet, so I would have to hide any specifics, but after four years of hard work, I managed to make it into the semifinalists of a manga award named for a certain god, so I was looking for a new place to live in advance.

That age just barely made me an adult, at eighteen years old.

The age of majority really did lower, didn't it...

From here on out, I would draw one-shots, work as an assistant, create storyboards for the sake of getting serialized, and ultimately release my own volumes. Considering the length of the journey I had in front of me, it felt like a level of difficulty beyond my specialist training or my survival life, but it gave me a bit of relief to know that I wouldn't have to be indebted to Gaen-san anymore.

Or so I wanted to say, but most likely, Gaen-san would have to be my guarantor even in Tokyo... Because, even after three years, I still wasn't exactly on good terms with my parents.

Though I didn't mind.

In the end, being indebted to Gaen-san wasn't exactly something I disliked.

Well... Despite not being on good terms, I've gotten to the point where I could talk to them a little. Though it was only a little bit at a time, ever since what happened with Uroko-chan.

Even if I were to fulfill my dream of becoming a mangaka, they weren't the sort to do a complete about-face, after all... As for mending this parent-child relationship, I'll leave it all up to the slow passage of time.

Perhaps, when I start to approach my sixtieth birthday or so, we could sit down for some tea—they say that parents won't be there by the time you wish to show filial piety, so please live long lives.

I was flying to Tokyo by plane.

Technically, going by trains was much faster, but ever since that day, when that plane to Okinawa ended up crashing, I had ended up completely shutting out planes from my mind—so I realized I had better dispel my misgivings, or I would never be able to ride a plane in the future.

Unlike that time, of course, I would be flying in economy class, within my means—but, huh?

After arriving at the airport and using the touch panel at the self-service counter to check in, the seat I reserved had been upgraded to first class?

For premium members, these were known as involuntary upgrades, which could happen for free on rare occasions... But this was so perplexing it was almost scary, so I called out to a nearby guide robot moving around on its own. These sorts of AI robots had become pretty commonplace in airports, though from a sci-fi perspective, it felt a little menacing...

"The upgrade was performed by that guest over there."

The robot responded as such with a deep masculine voice, and when I looked in the direction indicated, a man with an ominous and disquieting air, much too unsuitable for the new life I was about to set out on, was indeed seated intrepidly in the waiting area, looking at me.

"Yo, Sengoku. I can hardly recognize you."

"Kaiki-san... So you were alive after all."

Of course.

I figured it would be something like that... I was feeling zero surprise. He was never the type of guy that would simply die from a traffic accident. Though he wasn't exactly the type of guy to die from old age, either.

"Hmph. Though it would be nice if I could die from a traffic accident. Then I can go in the same way Tooe-sensei did."

"? Ah, your private tutor, right? And also Gaen-san's older sister. I heard from Uroko-chan."

"She taught me lots of things—about how to fool innocent children."

It wasn't really the sort of reminiscing I wanted to hear when I was about to set sail (?)...[149] By doing stuff like upgrading my plane ticket as he pleased, was he somehow able to fool the guide robot? I heard that the con men of today could be rather skilled in the IT department.

"Don't worry about it. Consider it a parting gift from me

—I haven't done anything like reserve the whole plane, so you can relax."

As if I could relax.

Don't say things that remind me of the crash.

However, I probably should be easily accepting of the goodwill of others—it was a seat that was quite beyond my station, when I'd only just won an award and hadn't even debuted, but as Ononoki-chan often said, I needed to keep my aspirations high.

High in the sky, like an airplane.

"I see. You really have changed, Sengoku. Your appearance did, too..."

"Oh. You mean these clothes? Tsukihi-chan picked out these clothes for me... Like Ononoki-chan, recently I've completely become Tsukihi-chan's dress-up doll."

Including my hairstyle, it was all left to her.

Her taste for those sorts of things was top-notch, that Tsukihi-chan.

She wasn't going to do anything like cut my bangs too short, so there was no need to worry.

"It's a pretty big deal that you're able to accept all that so easily—by the way, Sengoku. I was wondering if you could resolve a concern of mine before you set off on your journey."

As a specialist.

Well, if he said that, then I couldn't refuse.

Not that I could refuse after he'd upgraded my seat to first class... Perhaps it was that law of reciprocity that was often used in scammers' terminology.

"Three years ago, when you encountered Araundo Uroko on Iriomote Island, what exactly did you do? How in the world—did you drive off that snake into retirement?"

Saying that I drove her off made me look bad, didn't it?

It'll cause bad rumors about me to spread.

"I didn't do anything too impressive. It was what Gaen-san had sent me to Iriomote Island to do, after all—it was why she'd had me meet her daughter."

"...And that means?"

"I drew a picture. Of Uroko-chan."

I made her into a work of art.

In other words, it meant the same as what I'd done to Nakuna-chan or Sajou-kun—by representing the retaliations of the curses they'd been inflicted with in my sketchbook, I lifted those curses.

So basically, I did the same thing to Uroko-chan, the

originator of all of those curses—those scales that covered Uroko-chan's arms and legs, I carefully peeled them all off, one by one. Like drawing a hundred thousand strands of hair—remembering it now, it was like drawing in pointillism, and I thought I would go crazy.

My survival experience just before that had become useful in the most unexpected way—snake scales don't peel off as easily as fish scales, you see. It's like they degenerated, or they unified into a single whole.

"So you're saying you picked off her snake legs? For that snake that possessed five heads, you cut off her four limbs—"

"I didn't cut off anything. All I did was peel off her scales."

It was the opposite of materialization.

She'd been receiving the retaliations of her curses, her just deserts, for fifteen years, but by drawing them with paper and pen, I turned them into fiction.

Into emptiness, like the hollow of a giant tree.

At the same time, it meant the disappearance of the curse itself.

By taking away the effect, I eliminated the cause.

"So, when Gaen-senpai sent you to her daughter's location—it was to break the curse that had bound her? So she wanted you not to overthrow her, but to help her, is that it?"

"Well, Gaen-san never said so herself. Not before, and not even after—"

However, she didn't deny it, either.

That much was surprising in itself.

If it was wrong, then she could have easily denied it, but that onee-san that loved to chatter away had said nothing, for once.

"Well, her daughter was also something like a stubborn binding spell for Gaen-senpai. She was her daughter, but also like her older sister, too. So Gaen-senpai wouldn't be able to be honest about her feelings—however, it's also a bit cruel. If you took away the curse affecting her four limbs, then it probably wouldn't be good for Araundo's business."

"That's true. In the end, I was sent to Iriomote Island for the sake of drawing those snake legs. Really, that was all it was—everything else was pretty unnecessary. It's possible that she even had me sketch Nakuna-chan, who'd been hit by the curse's retaliation, as a preliminary step. Not for ascertaining the snake's location, but as practice for the final objective... Or perhaps I should call it a practice piece."

I didn't know her true intentions.

Perhaps not even Gaen-san herself knew... Even if she was the 'onee-san that knew everything', no matter how many years passed, she would never become the 'mother that knew everything'.

"I don't get it. I really don't get it,"

Uroko-chan had said.

Three years ago.

She, who had become my model and my motif, made no move to stop me. She certainly was capable of doing so if she wanted to, but without leaving her rattan chair, she continued to mumble about how incomprehensible it all was.

"If this is a harsh and difficult task for you, then there's no need for you to do this—so why are you trying to save me?"

I'm your enemy, and Mama's enemy, too.

But despite that, Nadeko-chan, why are you trying to peel off my scales?

"I may be your enemy, but unlike what Oshino Ougi is to Araragi Koyomi, I am not an enemy that you absolutely must confront—I'm just a snake that you're free to run away from. Though it was in an indirect manner, your life ended up extremely distorted because of me, so it would be fine if you hated or resented me. And even if not for that, I'm still an evil person, and an evil snake. What's the point of saving an endangered venomous snake that will naturally become extinct in the near future?"

"That's not really it."

That was how I responded, back when I was at the age of fifteen—to be honest, I'd given a half-hearted, noncommittal response. Since I was in the middle of wholeheartedly drawing each and every scale, I couldn't do anything about my slapdash answer.

However, I could imagine that, because I'd given my answer in such a state, it was able to come across as not showing any deception or shame or pretension.

"I'm just doing what everyone has done for me."

"....."

"What your mama, and your mama's friends have all done for me."

Without stopping my pen, I continued.

Letting my words flow as I thought of them, as though my words were paint.

"You see, I've been saved by lots of different people. Even when I was placed in a survival situation, I was saved by

thinking about those people—and it wasn't because I was a good kid, or a good person, or I took things seriously, or I was pitiful, and certainly not because I was cute."

And it wasn't that the people that had saved me.

Were particularly good people, either.

There was a lolicon, and there was a con man.

"But it's not like you have to be a good kid to go out and save people, and it's not like you're only allowed to save good kids—rather, don't you think it has more of an effect if a bad kid saves another bad kid? Don't you think it makes for a better picture?"

If you could only be nice to people who were nice to you, such a strict society could never work out—I would have ended up dead a long time ago.

But, like how Tsukihi-chan professed to be an ally of justice, and like how Nakuna-chan acted as the leader of her group—I was just doing something that I wasn't suited for.

"Don't think that people can only be rescued if they're worth rescuing. You don't even need to say, 'Thanks for saving me'—I'm just doing this because it's my job, after all."

"Because it's your job?—that sounds like a line you inherited from Mama."

Professionalism you inherited from Mama.

Uroko-chan gave a wry smile. That smile was also something inherited from Mama.

"—Nadeko-chan, I'm sure you felt this deeply during your supposed uninhabited island life, but the prevailing theory goes that humanity became humanity after discovering the concept of fire. But I like to stray from that course of things. It's always been my way of doing things to use back lanes in secret. That was how I was born, and that was how I was cursed."

Of course.

Though I'd say I was pretty high in the rankings of how many times I'd become a lost child that went astray from the pack... However, rather than humanity having become humanity after discovering "fire" being just a prevailing theory, wasn't it just the accepted theory? It wasn't something you could just refute and offer your own counter-theory.

Just as she'd said, my uninhabited island life began when I managed to wield "fire"... With the extremely primitive method of striking rocks against a boulder... I didn't know if my humanity started to overflow at that moment, but at the very least, there was no mistake that that had been the starting line. If I had not started that "fire", my own history of humanity

could not have begun, and the Sengoku species would have quickly gone extinct. However, if there was a popular answer outside of that... Well, perhaps she was going to say that humans became humans when they learned to use "tools"?

In my case, for the sake of starting a "fire", I had needed to use "stone" as tools... On top of that, I'd made a somewhat waterproof hearth, carved out a boulder to use as a bowl, and, though the production value hadn't been very good, I'd even made a harpoon.

It was often said that tools were only used by humans.

"That's not true at all. There are plenty of animals that make use of tools... There are even animals that create tools, too. The formation of a society based around community life is not a condition unique to humanity, either. That should be pretty obvious when you watch how ants and bees live."

In that case, as someone who had fallen astray from the pack, that put me on a lower level than ants and bees... Of course, even in the societies of ants or bees, there had to be some nonconformists that would end up falling astray.

Thinking about it, a vast jungle made up of countless plants could also be considered a pack, so to speak... Not in the sense that it was very packed and stuffy,[150] but in the sense that forming a strong group was what made an ecosystem.

Rather than a species, it would be a genus.

And I had been able to prove the helplessness of humans, when faced with such a group.

Then, if it wasn't "fire", if it wasn't "tools", and if it wasn't even "society", then what was the reason for the progression of humanity? I could say it was as expected of Gaen-san's daughter, as I was feeling like I was back in class.

She sure was good at this, to make me of all people think that I was back in class.

"My answer won't be all that surprising or pretentious. It's what you're doing right now, Nadeko-chan. Humanity became humanity when they became capable of drawing 'pictures'. That's what I think."

"? What do you mean?"

Drawing pictures... It was an unusual answer.

It was completely surprising. Anyone was capable of drawing pictures, right?

"You're saying that in a way a genius would. You're making me as taken aback as a frog being glared at. However, that's exactly why I can say it. That's right, anyone is capable of drawing... As long as they're human."

"...I still don't get it, sensei."

It was true that there was the possibility that I'd been able to light a "fire" at the time, not because the act of throwing rocks at a boulder had been enough, but because my "Skill of Snake Legs" had activated... Perhaps I could have unconsciously drawn a picture of the element on the surface of the boulder.

And, though I'd been continuously failing at making tools, I'd ultimately managed to obtain clothing by drawing a "picture"... However, that wasn't exactly a skill that was possessed by just anybody. It was like a heretical trick, unavailable to the masses. A bit of individuality that couldn't be published in a survival guide.

Just like how drawing Uroko-chan.

Was a role meant only for me, which couldn't be done by just anybody.

"I'm referring to the ability to share information, and even wisdom. By drawing 'pictures', and then by looking at 'pictures', humanity was able to spread their society throughout the world... That's when they were able to surpass ants and bees. Of course, normally you'd think of it as 'writing', but the idea that 'writing' originated from 'pictures' is not a theory with a prevailing or dissenting opinion, right?"

That was true.

That was exactly what hieroglyphs were, and even when it came to the formation of kanji, they said that the character for "human" formed from the shape of two people supporting each other[151]—how might the alphabet have been formed?

Symbols were essentially a type of drawing.

If so, there might be no way to achieve it on an uninhabited island in the wired or wireless form, but perhaps the Internet was the ultimate destination of humanity's progression—whether as images or videos, or even as text, we were essentially exchanging each one as its own "single picture", only a few inches wide, through our LCD screens, after all.

"What might have early humans felt when they were drawing those geoglyphs and cave paintings? Surely, they must have felt something like, 'I want people to see these,' and 'I want to show these to people', right?"

The desire to convey to other people.

That was the reason for the diffusion of culture, said Uroko-chan—just like the meaning of her name, her words had been a bit roundabout,[152] so it was hard for me to understand

what she was trying to say, but would I be able to understand a little better by putting even those feelings of hers into my art?

Diffusion.

Even before the formation of this information society, humanity had been sharing events, phenomena, and their feelings with each other—and if that sharing was in fact the reason for the formation of human society, then you could indeed say that the act of drawing pictures was key.

The history of humanity continued to receive portrayals across the land.

And then, across the sea—and from now on, across the universe.

The portrait of humanity would be drawn.

"...Haha."

I ended up laughing at myself.

Because, as someone who was actively moving my hands to draw a picture, I was thinking that it wasn't actually that much of a big deal... As an artist, I wasn't trying to speak like a genius, and I wasn't trying to be self-deprecating, but it really did sound like that idea was too lacking in modesty.

However, if it really was in the instincts of humans to draw, like how children wanted to scribble on the walls of their new home, then perhaps it was possible to build up this theory, and not just as a counter-theory... On that level, I was okay with supporting it.

To seek out paper and pen.

Perhaps that was not my desire as an aspiring mangaka, but simply human nature—

"...When I was in distress on that uninhabited island, and when I was not affected by anyone's gaze or opinion, even so, I still thought that I wanted to draw pictures, that I wanted to draw manga. But rather than having the special determination to do so, and rather than having the persistence to not give up on my dream, does that mean it had simply been a step in a reversion to my primal roots?"

That feeling of longing was a feeling that served as a form of salvation for me, but with such a blunt, heartrending interpretation, I couldn't help but feel a bit disappointed. And yet, at the same time, I was weirdly convinced.

"Well. Personally, when I watched you, Nadeko-chan, in such a state, I actually gained confidence in that interpretation. After losing everything, without having anything, being unable to eat or drink or converse or be satisfied, what actions would a human end up taking...? Nadeko-chan, you were the one to

teach me the answer to that."

It was a bit heavy of a responsibility to be used as a basis for all of humanity.

If anything, I'd prefer if you interpreted it as me having been a bit of a blockhead.

"Hm. I know little about art, but it seemed to me that when humans find themselves in distress on an uninhabited island, they won't cast curses—instead, they'll draw pictures."

"That's rich, coming from someone living it up at a resort."

"Even when at a resort, people will try to take photos, at least. Even if it's for the sake of uploading to Instagram, that makes another single picture."

So she used Instagram, did she?

Well, she'd been continuing her business of selling curses even now.

If she had been advertising her business there, then of course it would spread among the youth—or perhaps that spread could be called diffusion, instead.

"People aren't capable of writing if they don't learn how, but pictures can be drawn even without learning. There's no need to receive an education for drawing. It's on the same level as eating, drinking, and sleeping. To say it how Mama would say it, it's something that 'everyone knows'—and in the end, that utterly commonplace thing that 'everyone knows' is what saved you, Nadeko-chan, and it's what's saving me, too. As a sorcerer, it's not something I'm happy about—but, as someone responsible for scattering charm talismans all about, if my ultimate destination is to be sealed in pure-white paper, perhaps I'm just reaping what I've sown."

Reaping what I've sown? There was no one more fitting for those words than Sengoku Nadeko.

It was what I'd sown.

And, I would be reaping them myself.

"Charms are also a kind of shared illusion, you see. It's a bit unusual to say that the destination of humanity's progression is not reality, but an illusion, but it's the truth. Even so, even while I'm talking as though I've 'figured out everything', for me, drawings and paintings are not things to be drawn and recorded, but things to be read and understood—in order to share that information. I may have taken photos before, but I've never thought about taking the initiative to draw my own pictures."

And perhaps that was because she was Gaen-san's back

side, and because she was her daughter—Gaen-san never gave off the impression of someone that liked to "draw pictures". I didn't know what she was like in her teens... But she seemed like she would have read tons of books. Including manga.

"That's right. Mama was an avid reader. A reader, and a thinker. So that's why she's 'drawing' plenty of 'pictures' now, as the specialists' commander."

It sounded like she was 'drawing pictures' in the sense of working out battle strategies or formulating plans—in that sense, my sketch of Uroko-chan could also be considered a work that was drawn by Gaen-san.

Not working out strategies, but a work of art.[153]

"And you get the impression that the characters move on their own. In both strategies and art, things don't work out exactly the way you envision them—Mama is the type of person to let her actors improvise, while I, her daughter, prefer to plan things out meticulously, but even so, this conclusion was outside of my expectations."

"Is there really anything outside of your expectations? For the mother and daughter of the Gaens."

"Of course, we take great pleasure in things outside of our expectations."

Uroko-chan smiled at this.

In a very Gaen-like manner, as though speaking on behalf of her mama, as well.

"Within the scope of my official duties, it's true that the extent to which my charms ended up spreading was mostly beyond expectation—to an almost overindulgent level.[154] When information and wisdom are shared with a large group of people, the more it spreads, the more it can increase exponentially, and the more its content can be altered. It's like a game of telephone on a global scale, something that not even AI can fully grasp. In the same way pictures can be transformed into text—information can be encoded into symbols, and end up misrepresented. If you ask me, that's also a curse. A high-speed curse."

"Are you making a pun on 'curse' and 'sluggish'?[155] Though I did get the earlier pun about 'official duties' and 'overindulgent'..."

"See, we already had a problem in this game of telephone. Like a mistake that can occur in the countless iterations of gene replication. When images can be shared by all of humanity, it's possible for the collective to crush the individual. If the word of 'love', or the concept of 'dreams', or

the image of ‘motherhood’ weren’t shared by all of humanity, then Nadeko-chan, how easier do you think it would have been to live your life?”

“It—probably would have been a lot easier.”

It would have been easy-peasy.

However, that was but another standard image.

The desire to not be tainted by the social framework, shared rules, and common sense—all of it was included as part of a single picture.

It was because there was such a strong image of ‘love’ and ‘dreams’ and ‘motherhood’, that it was possible for their respective antitheses to be produced.

To be born.

It was nothing more than a matter of the order, or the chronology. If something produces its antithesis, and that antithesis produces a further antithesis, it paints a different picture from the back side of the back being the front. After all, not everyone will accept the information and knowledge they receive, and pass it on without resistance... And it wasn’t necessarily the case that individuality ended up crushed. It was because there were errors in gene replication that those gave birth to new things.

Even in a group, everyone had their worries, and everyone had their curses.

My middle school was the same. In fact, it had even been a place where oddballs were permitted to exist. Of course, we tried to fit them into rigid stereotypes all the same, but at the very least, we did not completely shut them out for the reason that they were oddballs. It was just that, if they were to get carried away and jump out of their cages, they would only find an even harsher society that mercilessly rejected them, spreading out before them like a jungle—and they would only realize this after jumping out, turning into a complex for them.

“I wonder, Nadeko-chan. Will you use that complex as fuel for your creativity, too? Being an outlaw and being hungry is what cultivates a rebellious spirit, after all. That’s something my own existence can prove.”

“I dunno about that. I can accept being an outlaw, but I’m a bit fed up with being hungry. I’ll have to keep working as hard as always, but I was never really a fan of the whole ‘using adversity as a springboard for growth’ thing.”

Of course, I did enjoy it in manga stories, and it did move me emotionally, and in the episodes from my great predecessors, the feeling of crawling your way out of adversity

was an idea that drove straight into my heart. However, if I were telling my own, true-to-life tale, my honest impression was that it gave off an unsatisfactory feeling.

"If so, that honest impression of yours is what makes up the foundation of your complex,"

said Uroko-chan flatly.

At this point, it felt less like I was sitting in class and more like I was sitting in therapy—especially because drawing pictures was a standard curriculum of therapy.

"Your negative feelings towards adversity is what makes you say that, Nadeko-chan. You're refusing to acknowledge the fact that 'you succeeded because you were unhappy'—it's an inferiority complex towards your inferiority complex. It's not too different from saying, 'I never asked to be born,' or, 'I didn't want to be born to these parents'—an unproductive paradox, where it would've been impossible to even state that displeasure unless you'd been born in the first place. After having gone through hell and back, no matter how much you succeed from this point forward, if you start to feel that you are losing out to those who have managed to succeed without facing any adversity... In the end, you are just averting your eyes from the adversity you faced in the past."

"...Are you trying to curse me? Uroko-chan."

Was she trying to increase the number of scales on her arms and legs even more than this?—I really would like to avoid having to deal with a curse that kept spreading to no end, no matter how much I drew and drew. I wasn't doing this digitally, so it wasn't like I could handle them with copy-and-paste, those countless scales.

"As if. I'm just talking about the prevailing theory. It has nothing to do with my own personal theory. This isn't even speaking on behalf of Mama, but just the voice of the world. You know, even Araragi Koyomi has encountered many conflicts. If he hadn't met those many 'unhappy girls', including a vampire on the verge of death, he certainly wouldn't be the man he is today. Depending on how you look at it, you could say he grew up feeding on the misfortune of others—though I can only imagine what it would be like to find happiness in taking care of a vampire as a child, it probably wasn't easy. In the same way, Nadeko-chan, I'm sure you don't find it easy to acknowledge, 'I became a mangaka because my friends cursed me,' or 'I became a mangaka because the onii-chan that I loved broke my heart.'"

She was trying to get me to drop my pen, huh.

Or perhaps, the scale that I was about to draw next was

the scale that had come about as a result of Nakuna-chan's curse—and it was Nakuna-chan herself rejecting me.

Or—was I rejecting myself?

My adversity, my complex, my past, myself.

Well, if I had to say it, what I didn't want to recognize was not the fact that I was cursed, but the fact that I'd cast my own curses—especially, the era in which I'd reigned over a mountain summit as a god was a disgrace I did not want to talk about. Even now, was I still unable to face my sins and my curses?

If so, the scales that were the hardest for me to draw.

Were my own scales.

Detours, which I wanted to put off. Rain and dew, which could only be roundabout.

A hollow—which resembled emptiness.[156]

"While those difficult-to-draw scales can serve as your armor, Nadeko-chan, at the same time, they're also scabs that you must peel off. Because scabs are not the wounds themselves, but proof that your wounds have healed."

"……"

"The world has become a place where it's hard to even dare to dream, but at the same time, times have changed such that dreams are easier than ever to fulfill. I won't say that our society has grown richer, but, inversely proportional to that, the possibilities of any future have widened immensely when compared to the past."

Was she referring to how, if one were to write "mangaka" on their career survey forms, people were less likely to get angry at them in the current era? In elementary school, when Tsukihi-chan was asked, "What's your dream?", she answered, "I want to build a school"… It was quite the disparity from me, who'd given the safe answer of "I want to be a bride"… Or rather, I could feel the difference in status.[157]

"In the current era, writing 'bride' would be less of a safe answer, though. Rather, it's now widely known that envisioning a stable future is but a happy illusion, and being carelessly motivated to pursue one's passions has now become the norm. Not a portrait, but that image of the future—perhaps I could even call it an image of lies—has spread as a single picture. Even though things may not always go as planned, it's become less difficult, in terms of both tools and environment, to attempt to fulfill your dreams in some shape or form—our society truly is blessed."

Blessed?

That was a word unbefitting a purveyor of curses.

"No, no, it's very befitting. Because I'm worried about Nadeko-chan falling to ruin from being bound by celebrations, not by curses—a blessing can also become a binding spell, after all. If a person ends up giving a speech at some award ceremony, and they say something like, 'I have come this far because of my loving parents and my friends who have guided me,' without any emotion, er, without any resistance, then I would say that that person has finally succeeded."

She'd very clearly said "without any emotion" before correcting herself... Depending on how I looked at it, it almost sounded like she was trying to curse the act of speech-giving that had become popular, but regardless, it wasn't as though I didn't understand what Uroko-chan was trying to say.

It came through to me, like a picture.

In my case, if I were to write 'To my parents' or 'To my first love' in the dedication of my first printed volume, that would serve as a signpost that I had achieved success... It seemed like a pretty high hurdle to overcome.

Saying thanks, huh?

In the past, I'd spoken words of gratitude much more meekly.

Though I had intended for my apologies to not be completely emotionless.

"It's possible that, after you succeed, you'll let that success become your complex. There may be a future in which you say, 'It wasn't supposed to be like this', after your dream has come true—after being pampered and spoiled, your personality may turn warped, you'll become unable to trust anybody, and you might end up being unfulfilled by your fulfilling life. Perhaps you might realize that you felt more alive when you were starving on an uninhabited island. Worrying about success becoming a trauma might be a luxurious concern, but isn't it a pattern you often see from other successful people? No matter how many hits one has produced, they'll eventually grow old and wither away. Like how you've heard, 'You used to be so cute before,' Nadeko-chan, you'll now have to work hard in order to hear, 'Your work used to be so interesting before.'"

"You're saying some pretty nasty things."

"Even though you're trying to help me, all you're getting in return is me saying these nasty things. And similarly, people won't see the drawings you want them to see, and they'll curse you even when you were just trying to amuse them."

But even so, can you still say it, Nadeko-chan?

That you're doing this work because you like it.[158]

"...Yes, I can."

That was my response.

It hadn't been an immediate response, but as though chewing on my words—I drew a single scale.

As though I was chewing like a snake, I tied it off.

This was my deadline.[159]

"I can say that. By doing so, it'll heal my wounds."

I was pretty used to violent fluctuations.

And I'd gotten pretty used to violent turbulence, too.

"You sure aren't cute at all, Nadeko-chan."

Why, thank you very much.

To hear that was a delight.

"A bad kid saving another bad kid makes for a better picture, huh?"

In that case, she said.

Still sitting in that rattan chair, Uroko-chan took off her gown—like a snake shedding its skin.

"This will make it easier to draw me, right?"

Well, I did say that it's easier to draw people in the nude... But drawing the smooth, stark naked figure of a fifteen-year-old girl was not something I could put in a picture.

Even harder to draw than her scales was Uroko-chan herself.

She'd inherited quite the good personality from her mama, hadn't she.

"...And with that, Uroko-chan closed down her business, and began attending school from the resort. I think she's a third-year in high school by now."

That being said, I hadn't attended school for even a day since then... I hadn't gone to my middle school graduation ceremony, and I hadn't taken any high school entrance exams... I wasn't certain about what year she was in, but I was fairly sure that she was going to and from school by boat.

She was making a living by catching *habu* snakes. Probably.

It would be nice if their school had a parents' day before her graduation.

"Hmph. How foolish. Even though high school is probably more full of curses than anything."

"What kind of a high school life did you have, Kaiki-san..."

Had it been around that time when he received private

tutoring from Gaen Tooe-san? Though I couldn't even begin to imagine what Kaiki-san was like in his teens... I began to wonder if one day, I might get to the point where someone would say the same about me.

Someday, maybe fifteen years from now... My immature teenage years, which seemed like they were eternal or everlasting, would end up being hard to even imagine.

"Anyway, good job. You were able to deal with the curses, something that neither Gaen-senpai nor Araragi, nor even Gaen-sensei had been capable of doing... It's not really my place to say, as someone who'd strayed far off the established routes, but Sengoku Nadeko, you are now a specialist that anyone would be proud of."

"A snake specialist? Flattery won't get you anywhere."

"I suppose that's a tremendous loss for me—but I'll say this again. The fact that you've become capable of honestly and straightforwardly accepting my praise is proof of your growth. However, that's the problem. Sengoku. That's the problem. From what I can see, that's what's still a mystery to me—let's say that Gaen-senpai's goal was that all along. I can accept that you were able to figure out her true intentions, while I had missed the mark—however, even if I did miss the mark, wouldn't you say the question itself is still left over?"

"Left over? What is?"

"The original question, of why Araundo Uroko even made Iriomote Island her base in the first place—even if Gaen-senpai hadn't dispatched the three of us to figure out why, that 'why' still remains, right?"

Ah.

I see, I see—what he said made sense. Even though a different answer had been found, that didn't bring an end to the question from three years ago, the question we hadn't actually been dispatched to resolve.

I was full of blunders, wasn't I.

"...However, Kaiki-san, I have to say that it's because you didn't make it to Iriomote Island that you've held onto that question for so long. Because you didn't get to enjoy a two-week vacation like me."

"Oh? So you're capable of sarcasm, now, Sengoku?"

"It's not really sarcasm, but painted over by nostalgia."

Or maybe it was goat meat.[160]

Though I wouldn't call it snake meat.

"But you don't need a reason to live on Iriomote Island. Because that island is practically heaven on earth."

Just between you and me, I even used Iriomote Island as the setting for my award-winning work—with the cunning act of using an Iriomote cat as the motif.

"So you can say such good things, too. And so, are you going to tell the stories of your nostalgia? Your tales?"

"Well, it's my job to portray them, now."

"I'm convinced, Sengoku. And I'm relieved. I was the one that said all those irresponsible things on that mountain to spur you on, after all—and by now, that had been my only regret."

What was this con man even saying?

Convinced? He probably didn't even pay taxes.[161]

But, if Kaiki-san hadn't deceived me at that time, I probably wouldn't be where I am now—I probably would never have boarded a plane for my entire life.

"Kaiki-san, if you ever feel like retiring from being a con man, just let me know. I'll make you into one of my works."

"I'll pass. I'll live as a con man, and die as a con man."

I'll be a con man even in death.

That's my curse.

Saying all that again... Speaking of which, I also had a question I wanted to ask, the next time we met. It was a bit boorish of a question after all this time, but I wanted him to clarify the mysteries surrounding his death.

"Hey, Kaiki-san. Three years ago, when the plane crashed, how did you survive? What sort of deceptive technique did you use—"

I said.

And when I asked, the guide robot said,

"There are thirty minutes left until boarding, so please proceed to the security checkpoint. If you have any carry-on luggage—"

as it pushed me from behind.

As expected from AI, it really couldn't read the mood. But, it was that time already... Being late to board a plane was as awful of an omen as a plane crashing. The plane probably wouldn't wait for me, even if I was first class.

"Sorry, Kaiki-san. I have to go—"

When I turned away from the waiting area to face the guide robot, oh my, the sinister con man had already vanished from sight—so it ended up like this just from taking my eyes off him for a second, huh.

Criminals sure were quick to flee.

And it seemed he wasn't going to reveal his deceptive

techniques so easily—even if I wanted to press him for answers, he hadn't left any contact information behind, so whatever. If I became a best-seller and made a huge fortune, he would probably come to see me again.

And, when that happened.

Perhaps I could let him deceive me again.

I'd been a bundle of nerves for my first security inspection and boarding in three years, but starting my new life in first class gave off such a luxurious and special feeling that I was able to relax as soon as I sat in my seat. They even provided slippers that were probably more expensive than the shoes I was wearing—at this level of pleasantness, I'd almost forgotten to set my smartphone to airplane mode.

Since it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, I figured I could watch a movie through the in-flight entertainment system, so I was thinking I may as well turn my phone off entirely, but at that very moment, as if it had been perfectly timed, a message arrived.

I was saying "as if it had been perfectly timed", but the sender of the message that came with such perfect timing was, of course, my guarantor.

"Nadekko! Congrats on getting to Tokyo (:-)

There's a centipede extermination going on in the city, but do you want to join?

Yotsugi will be there, too ☆"

It was an invite that had completely seen through my financial situation and helplessness, so I couldn't help but smile. Really, I was no match for that master and disciple. Like parent, like child. The child of a frog is a frog, and the child of a snake is a snake. Understood. I may as well take this opportunity to earn the money for my security deposit in advance. If there's any change left over, then perhaps I could visit an island in the south for some reference material. The future ahead of me was long, so I had better enjoy it.

A journey of a thousand miles was still a one-way road.[162]

And for these legs that walk the path of snakes, I'll continue to draw them out.

Afterword

The question of "If you could only bring one thing with you to an uninhabited island, what would you bring?", the psychology test referenced directly by Sengoku Nadeko herself in the story, has become so commonplace that it has taken on a bit of a comedic nature, where the objective becomes how to answer the question in order to appear superior to others. If you were to say something too unusual, you could face the tragedy of people thinking that you were intentionally trying to be unusual, so instead of worrying about how to respond, people will find themselves trying to alter the question itself. Basically, they'll change the "if you could only bring one thing" portion into "if you could bring as much as you wanted of something", making the question into, "If you could bring as much as you wanted of something, what would you bring, and how much?" If one was told they could bring as much food, water, tents, knives, clothes, and of course books, as they wanted... If one was told they could invite as many friends as they wanted, and bring over as many family members as they wanted, then how would they respond? Rather than being limited to a single thing, I feel as if it conversely makes the scope of the question too hard to narrow down. It was likely human nature to not want to bring anything beyond what was necessary, which was why in traveling, it was natural to reduce one's luggage as much as possible. Even if you have a favorite book, you may actually want to travel in order to get away from that book every once in a while... Ultimately, even if the question said "as much as you wanted of something", it would end up being physically impossible to walk around with too much of something. Even data could result in errors. So before anything else, perhaps we should first ask, "Do you want to go to an uninhabited island or not?"

And with that, the *Monogatari* series' Monster season has been strangled, or rather, wrapped up by Sengoku-san.[163] In one way, she has shown even more growth than Araragi-kun, and originally, I hadn't even thought that the substory of Monster Season, the Araundo chapter, would take the form of an entire novel like this. Because these sorts of things happen, I really can't stop writing *Monogatari*. If I were to be asked if I could write as much as I wanted about something, perhaps the answer would be the futures of Sengoku Nadeko and Araundo Uroko. With that, this was a novel deathly written 100 percent

as a hobby,[164] “Shinomonogatari (2) Final Episode: Nadeko Around”.

Naturally, Sengoku-san was placed on the front cover. It’s actually been quite a while since she’s been there, hasn’t it. VOFAN-san, thank you very much. In a world where the future is always uncertain, I’d like to avoid making any careless announcements, but please look forward to Sengoku-sensei’s next work. And last but not least, congratulations to Iriomote Island for being designated as a World Heritage Site!

NISIOISIN

Translator's Afterword

There is a joke that goes something like, "A man orders coffee without cream. The waiter says, 'I'm sorry, we have no cream. Can it be coffee without milk?'" I'm not sure it's all that funny of a joke, though I do think it's a bit thought-provoking (the joke often gets linked to the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, though upon investigation, the original joke was unrelated), but one of the funnier things about the joke to me is a memory I have of one of my high school teachers telling the joke—she had thought the whole point of the joke was that the waiter was simply being stupid. Perhaps the lesson to learn here is that thinking too much about these sorts of things just makes you look stupid, which does not make for a very convincing preface to the point I'm trying to make in the first place, but I digress.

I figure it's worth noting here for posterity that the translations of *Shinomonogatari* Volumes 1 and 2 were released simultaneously, as a sort of imitation of the simultaneous release of the two novels for their original publication. As the person who has saddled himself with the translation of these novels, I got the idea in my head that English-speakers should get the freedom of choice (or the illusion of choice) between reading Volume 1 first or Volume 2 first. About part of the way through, I considered that most people would probably just read in the order of Volume 1 and then Volume 2—after all, if the order is arbitrary anyway, may as well read them in the listed order, right? However, I'd say this shares some resemblance to the aforementioned joke about coffee without milk. I suppose if you were to sit down at a café and order *Shinomonogatari (1)* without *Shinomonogatari (2)* and the waiter goes "I'm sorry, we have no *Shinomonogatari (2)*," it would end up being a lesser experience than if the café did indeed stock *Shinomonogatari (2)* and it was simply your choice not to read it first. With that in mind, if you're here after having read Volume 1 and Volume 2 in that order, I hope you were still able to find some value in choosing that order yourself. (Though of course, the experience of getting to read both volumes back-to-back is also something that can't be dismissed.)

And for those of you who are here after finishing Volume 2 and have yet to read Volume 1, I suppose you have benefited the most from this. Congratulations. Anyway, on behalf of the author, I would like to thank you for reading "Shinomonogatari

(2)"—and I would also like to thank you for reading my translation.

Polaris

Updated May 26, 2024

Notes

[←1]

なりますし *narimasu shi* “after all, this will be”, なりすまし *narisumashi* “masquerading”.

[←2]

令和 *Reiwa* is the name of the current era of Japan’s official calendar (with respect to the publication date).

[←3]

遂に *tsui ni* and 終に *tsui ni* both mean “finally, at last”, with different kanji. Arguably, the former has a connotation of “leading up to this”, and the latter has a connotation of “being at the end”.

[←4]

ダッコちゃん *Dakko-chan*. A doll with its arms reaching out as if to hug something.

[←5]

恋女房 *koinyoubou* “one’s dear wife”. A Japanese joke that stems from the idea that a strong battery of pitcher and catcher is like a married couple.

[←6]

一筋縄 *hitosujinawa* “ordinary method”, literally meaning “one strand of rope”. Nadeko then says 二筋縄, replacing the “one” with “two”.

[←7]

泡盛 *awamori*. Liquor exclusively distilled in Okinawa.

[←8]

知的 *chiteki* “intellectual”, 知能犯 *chinouhan* “white-collar crime”. The latter term can literally be translated as “intellectual crime”, in contrast to violent crimes that are more physical in nature.

[←9]

ばらす *barasu* “expose”, バラス島 *Barasu-shima* “Barasu Island”.

[←10]

由布島 *Yubu-jima* “Yubu Island”, 湯布院 *Yufuin* (a district in Ōita Prefecture).

[←11]

佐渡 *Sado* (referring to the island or city), 佐賀 *Saga* (referring to the city or prefecture).

[←12]

千石 *Sengoku* and 百石 *Hyakkoku*. 石 *koku* is a unit of volume, so she’s saying that she’ll decrease from a thousand *koku* to a hundred *koku*. In other words, she feels smaller compared to the old couple’s name value.

[←13]

Also known as ワニワニパニック *Wani Wani Panic*.

[←14]

権力者 *kenryokusha* “influential person”, 人権 *jinken* “human rights”.

[←15]

離島甲子園 *ritou koushien* “Remote Islands Koshien”. A baseball tournament held across remote islands in Japan (akin to the Japanese High School Baseball Championship which is referred to as Koshien).

[←16]

舐める *nameru* can mean “too look down on”, but it literally means “to lick”, hence the ice cream reference.

[←17]

奄美大島 *Amami Ōshima* and 甘味 *amami* “sweetness”.

[←18]

沖永良部島 *Okinoerabujima*, 選ぶ島 *erabu shima* “choose the island”.

[←19]

へいわきねんこうえん *heiwa kinen kouen* “Peace Memorial Park”. The kanji would be 平和記念公園, but it could potentially be confused for 記念講演 *kinen kouen* “memorial lecture”.

[←20]

陰気 *inki* “gloomy, dismal”, インチキ *inchiki* “deception, fraud”.

[←21]

必ず *kanarazu* “absolutely”, 必須 *hissu* “required”, 必要 *hitsuyou* “necessary”.

[←22]

The symbol referred to as “asterisk” is actually the Japanese reference mark (※), consisting of two crossed lines and four dots. Nadeko compares it to the *kanji* for “necessary” (必), which consists of two crossed strokes and three dot radicals.

[←23]

科目 *kamoku* “subject”, 目がない *me ga nai* “to have no eye for”.

[←24]

地理 *chiri* “geography”, チリ *chiri* “Chile”.

[←25]

十勝 *Tokachi*, a district in Hokkaido, contains the *kanji* for “ten victories”.

[←26]

馬脚を現す *bakyaku o arawasu*, “to show one’s true colors”. 馬脚 *bakyaku* literally means “horse legs”, and Kaiki extends the metaphor with 鹿脚 *kakyaku* “deer legs”. Together, “horse” and “deer” make 馬鹿 *baka*

“idiot”.

[←27]

達急動 *takkyuudou*, the special move of Prince Yamato from *Bikkuriman*. Previously referenced in “Tsubasa Cat”.

[←28]

ノネコ *noneko* and 野良猫 *noraneko* technically both refer to undomesticated cats. The distinction between the two is generally given as: *noraneko* (translated as “stray cat”) are cats reliant on humans to survive, while *noneko* (translated as “feral cat”) are cats that can fend for themselves in the wild.

[←29]

野良犬 *norainu* (translated as “stray dog”) and 野犬 *yaken* (translated as “wild dog”). 野犬 *yaken* can also be read as *noinu* (though often written as ノイヌ). The distinction between *norainu* and *noinu* is basically the same as the distinction between *noraneko* and *noneko*, but both *norainu* and *noinu* can be considered *yaken*.

[←30]

“Iriomote cat” is the proper English term for イリオモテヤマネコ *Iriomote-yamaneko*, but it can be literally translated as “Iriomote mountain cat”. The species name is always in *katakana*, but Nadeko uses the *kanji* (西表山猫 *Iriomote-yamaneko*) here to highlight the literal meaning.

[←31]

山猫 *yamaneko*, translated here as “mountain cat”, is actually a term that actually points to several different species, including wildcats, leopard cats, and lynxes.

[←32]

Originally, Nadeko references the fact that 教師 *kyoushi* “teacher” and 詐欺師 *kizashi* “con man” both contain 師 *shi* “master”.

[←33]

Originally, Nadeko says マルネコ *maruneko* “round cat”, which is corrected to マヌルネコ *manuruneko* “Pallas’s cat”.

[←34]

Kariyushi shirts are shirts that are based on (and resemble) Hawaiian shirts, made to promote Okinawan tourism.

[←35]

薄汚い *usugitanai* “dirty-looking”, 薄着 *usugi* “lightly dressed”.

[←36]

The city of Iwaki is known for a resort named Spa Resort Hawaiians, which features a Hawaiian theme and hula dancing.

[←37]

海人 *uminchu* is the Okinawan word for “fisherman”, and is a popular word displayed on souvenir T-shirts from Okinawa.

[←38]

幹部 *kanbu* “leaders, top brass”, 患部 *kanbu* “wound, diseased part”.

[←39]

犬 *ken* “dog”, 件 *ken* “case”.

[←40]

条件 *jouken* “condition”, 条約 *jouyaku* “treaty”.

[←41]

反目 *hanmoku* “hostility”, ハンモック *hanmokku* “hammock”.

[←42]

サップ *sappu* “SUP” (or “standup paddleboarding”), シャラップ *sharappu* “shut up”.

[←43]

蛇の生殺し *hebi no namagoroshi* “half-killing a snake”, a figure of speech for “leaving something unfinished, possibly with the intention of inflicting suffering”.

[←44]

戦き *ononoki* “shiver, shudder”, 斧乃木 *Ononoki*.

[←45]

Originally, Yotsugi asks how many times Nadeko is going to use the particle を *o*, because Nadeko’s previous sentence consisted of many object clauses linked with that particle.

[←46]

そば *soba* “nearby”. 相場 *souba* “market price”, figuratively “conventional”.

[←47]

満目蕭条 *manmokushoujou*. A four-character idiom that means, “a scene that looks desolate and forlorn as far as the eye can see”.

[←48]

うねる *uneru* “to twist”, 唸る *unaru* “to moan”.

[←49]

見舞われる *mimawareru* “to suffer”, 舞う *mau* “to dance”.

[←50]

衣食足りて礼節を知る *ishoku tarite reisetsu o shiru*. A Japanese saying. Literally, “only when basic needs for living are met can people spare the effort to be polite”.

[←51]

地震雷火事親父 *jishin kaminari kaji oyaji* “earthquakes, thunder, fires, and fathers”. A list of things that are generally feared.

[←52]

衣食住 *ishokujuu* “clothing, food, and shelter”, or the basic necessities of life. Nadeko suggests the order should be 食住衣 *shokujuui*, or “food, shelter, and clothing”.

[←53]

月火 *Tsukihi*, 火 *hi* “fire”.

[←54]

Nadeko originally uses 暗礁に乗り上げる *anshou ni noriageru*, which literally means “to be stranded on a reef” but figuratively means “to run into difficulties”.

[←55]

The original pun involves 日向 *hinata* “in the sun” with 日和る *hiyoru* “to be noncommittal”.

[←56]

Originally, Nadeko compared two different Japanese words for “flint”, 火打ち石 *hiuchiishi* and 燧石 *suiseki*.

[←57]

Quote from *Ranma ½* from the character Cologne.

[←58]

Possibly a quote from *Star of the Giants*, but I was unable to verify this.

[←59]

A reference to *Star of the Giants*.

[←60]

ブラック企業 *burakku kigyou* “black company”, or a company that exploits its employees.

[←61]

仮想 *kasou* “supposed”, 火葬 *kasou* “cremated”.

[←62]

火急 *kakyuu* “urgency”. Contains the kanji for “fire”, 火.

[←63]

火事場の馬鹿力 *kajiba no bakajikara*, literally “foolish power at the scene of a fire”. A term that roughly equates to “adrenaline rush” or “fight-or-flight response”.

[←64]

人口 *jinkou* “population”, 人工 *jinkou* “man-made”.

[←65]

The original phrase is 一念岩をも通す *ichinen iwa o mo toosu*, “A single thought can even pierce a boulder”.

[←66]

迂路 *uro* “detour” is the word used in 迂路子 *Uroko*, which would literally

mean “detour child”.

[←67]

It’s a superstition in Japan to put snakeskin in your wallet for good fortune.

[←68]

干物 *hoshimono* “things dried in the sun”, combined with the usual 物語 *monogatari* “story”.

[←69]

脱皮 *dappi* “shedding of skin”, 脱する *dassuru* “to escape from”.

[←70]

There was no pun here, originally. 軒下 *nokishita* “eaves”, 葉っぱ *happa* “leaves”.

[←71]

Originally a kanji pun, breaking up 厳密 *genmitsu* “strict” into 厳 *gen* (also meaning “strict’) and 密集 *misshuu* (meaning “crowding together”).

[←72]

精根 *seikon* “vitality” contains the kanji for 根 “root”, hence the use of the term 抜根 *bakkon* “uprooting”.

[←73]

砂を噛むよう *suna o kamu you*, literally “like chewing sand”, but used to mean “insipid, dull”.

[←74]

失神 *shisshin*, “stupefaction”. The kanji literally mean “loss” and “god”.

[←75]

研ぐ *togu* means “to hone, to polish”, but also just means “to wash rice”. The word used for “wash” earlier was 洗う *arau*.

[←76]

シラウオ *shirauo* “Japanese icefish”.

[←77]

躍り食い *odorigui* and 活け作り *ikezukuri* are both ways of serving fish while they are still alive.

[←78]

Combining 幸い *saiwai* “fortunately” with 海の幸 *umi no sachi* “seafood” (lit. “fortune of the sea”) to make 海の幸い *umi no saiwai* “fortunately in the ocean”.

[←79]

格別 *kakubetsu* “exceptional”, 別格 *bekkaku* “extraordinary”.

[←80]

衣 *i* “clothing”, 異 *i* “difference of opinion”.

[←81]

住 *juu* “shelter”, 重心 *juushin* “balance”.

[←82]

建物 *tatemono* “building”, but the kanji 建 *tate* (from 建てる *tateru* “to build”) was replaced by 崩れ *kuzure* (from 崩れる *kuzureru* “to crumble”).

[←83]

場当たり *ba atari* “haphazard”, 罰当たり *batsu atari* “receiving retribution”.

[←84]

かまくら *kamakura*, a dome-shaped hut out of snow.

[←85]

いざかまくら *iza kamakura*. When written with kanji as いざ鎌倉, it means “when something major happens”, a phrase originating from the time of the Kamakura shogunate, where *samurai* would congregate in the city of Kamakura whenever something major happened. The pun plays on the city of Kamakura with *kamakura* as a snow hut.

[←86]

子泣きじじい *konaki-jijii*. A *yokai* that lures passersby to pick it up. When it gets picked up, it transforms into a heavy stone that crushes its victim to death.

[←87]

砂かけばばあ *sunakake-babaa*. A *yokai* that throws sand at passersby.

[←88]

A pun on Gregor Samsa, main character of Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*. In Japanese, the name Samsa is rendered as ザムザ *Zamuza*, with the pun being ザ・ムザムザ *za muzamuza*, where むざむざ *muzamuza* means “helpless, without resistance”.

[←89]

千石 *Sengoku* is made up of the kanji for 千 “thousand” and 石 “stone”.

[←90]

ストロー *sutoroo* “straw” (as in drinking straw) is in English. Nadeko says that in Japanese, the word is 藁 *wara* “straw” (as in the dry stalks of wheat), thus likening it to weeds.

[←91]

命知らず *inochi-shirazu* “reckless” (literally “not knowing about life”), 昆布知らず *konbu shirazu* “not knowing about kelp”.

[←92]

焼く *yaku* “to fry”, 焼きが回る *yaki ga mawaru* “to become dull, to lose one’s edge”.

[←93]
地理 *chiri* “geography”, 理知 *richi* “intellect”, チリ *chiri* “Chile”.

[←94]
相合い傘 *aiaigasa* “sharing an umbrella”, but also referring to a common doodle in Japan where the names of two people in love can be written under an umbrella symbol.

[←95]
四コマ漫画 *yonkoma manga* “4-koma manga”. A comic strip with four panels.

[←96]
持ちキャラ *mochi kyara*, referring to the character one primarily plays as, such as in a fighting game. In English, it is generally referred to as one’s “main”.

[←97]
無人島 *mujintou* “uninhabited island”, 無尽蔵 *mujinzou* “unlimited supply”.

[←98]
スランプ *suranpu* “slump”, スクラップ *sukurappu* “scrap”.

[←99]
没 *botsu* “rejection (of a manuscript)”, 水没 *suibotsu* “submerging”.

[←100]
蛇足 *dasoku* “redundancy, superfluity” is comprised of the kanji for “snake” and “leg”.

[←101]
式神 *shikigami*. The second kanji is then replaced with 紙 *kami* for “paper”.

[←102]
おいそれ *oisore* “readily”, おそれおそれ *osoreosore* “fearfully”.

[←103]
絵に描いた餅 *e ni kaita mochi*, literally “picture of rice cakes”, referring to a prize beyond one’s reach (i.e. you cannot actually enjoy the rice cakes because it is just a picture). In English, a phrase with a similar meaning would be “pie in the sky”.

[←104]
理 *kotowari* “natural way of things, conventions”, 断り *kotowari* “permission, consent”.

[←105]
山ガール *yama gaaru* “mountain girl”, 山狩り *yamagari* “mountain hunt”.

[←106]

雑草 *zassou* “weeds”, 野草 *yasou* “wild plants”.

[←107]

七草の節句 *nanakusa no sekku* “Festival of Seven Herbs” is a tradition of eating seven-herb rice porridge towards the beginning of the year. There is primarily 春の七草 *haru no nanakusa* “seven herbs of spring”, which is mirrored by 秋の七草 *aki no nanakusa* “seven herbs of autumn”. There are no corresponding herbs for summer or winter.

[←108]

The full quote is 皐夔稷契、何の書をか読むべき *koukishokusetsu, nan no sho wo ka yomu beki*, and comes from 十八史略 *Eighteen Histories in Brief*, a Chinese history text that was also popular in Japan. The line is used as a retort to someone not being well-read, because at the time of Gao, Kui, Ji, Qi (referring to the four wise ministers of the legendary Emperor Shun), there were no books, suggesting that books were not necessary to become wise.

[←109]

蜂の巣 *hachi no su* “beehive”. The reticulum of a cow is referred to as the ハチノス *hachinosu* for its honeycomb-like appearance, and is colloquially known as “honeycomb” in English, as well.

[←110]

雀蜂 *suzume-bachi* “hornet”, but the kanji literally mean “sparrow bee”.

[←111]

雀の涙 *suzume no namida*, lit. “sparrow tears”, figuratively “an insignificant amount”. Punned with 雀蜂 *suzume-bachi* “hornet” (see note 110).

[←112]

The original figure of speech is 背に腹はかえられない *se ni hara wa kaerarenai*, figuratively meaning “a small sacrifice may be necessary to solve a more pressing problem”. Literally, it means “you can’t exchange your stomach for your back”, which Nadeko then modifies with “empty stomach”.

[←113]

幕府 *bakufu* “shogunate”, 瀑布 *bakufu* “waterfall”.

[←114]

Referencing the phrase 人をのろわば穴二つ *hito o norowaba ana futatsu*, which means “If you curse someone, dig two graves”.

[←115]

足首 *ashikubi* “ankle” is made up of the kanji for “leg” and “neck”.

[←116]

泣きどころ *nakidokoro* “weak point”. Literally, it means “the part that makes one cry”, with the context being that it’s “the part of the body that makes someone even as gallant as the legendary hero Benkei cry”. It essentially has the same meaning as Achilles heel.

[←117]
うろ *uro* “hollow” (as in a hole in a tree), うつろ *utsuro* “hollow” (as in blank eyes).

[←118]
うろ *uro* “hollow”. This word can be written with the kanji 虚, which can also be pronounced *kyo* (which can mean “falsehood”). Nadeko then says 虚々, where the second kanji is meant as the repetition of the first, so the reading could be *uro kyo*, but the furigana is written as *uroko* (to complete the pun).

[←119]
うろ *uro* “hollow”, うろうろ *urouro* “aimless, haphazard”.

[←120]
這う這うの体 *houhou no tei*, literally “body that crawls”, figuratively “struggling to escape”.

[←121]
血清 *kessei* “serum” contains the kanji for 血 “blood”. The word refers to blood serum, but is also used to refer to antivenoms because they can be made from blood serum.

[←122]
蛇は寸にして人を呑む *ja wa sun ni shite hito wo nomu*. The literal meaning is as given. Figuratively, it means that outstanding people will show signs of it when they’re young.

[←123]
A reference to the saying 弘法筆を選ばず *koubou fude wo erabazu*, “Kōbō is not picky about his tools”. Kōbō Daishi was a famous Buddhist monk and calligrapher. The saying is similar in meaning to the English proverb, “A bad workman blames his tools”.

[←124]
See note 102.

[←125]
有孔虫 *yuukouchuu* “foraminifera”. Originally, Yotsugi breaks down the kanji as 孔が有る虫 *ana ga aru mushi* “bugs that have holes”.

[←126]
シスコン王子 *shisukon ouji* “Prince Ciscon” is a manga by Fujiko Fujio A. As far as I’ve found, Ace Island is an island where half of it is a dense jungle while the other half is an urbanized city.

[←127]
Reference to the saying 犬も歩けば棒に当たる *inu mo arukeba bou ni ataru* “If a dog walks, they will hit a stick”. The figurative meaning is that taking action will cause some sort of reaction, while nothing will come about as a result of inaction. The similar phrase “The dog that trots about finds a bone,” which may or may not be an actual English saying, was referenced here.

[←128]
二匹目のドジョウ *futatsume no dojou* “second loach”. “To aim for the second loach under the willow tree” is an expression meaning to try to imitate a person or thing that has already been successful.

[←129]
ハブ *habu*, which can refer to the *habu* snake or the word “hub”.

[←130]
重ねる *kasaneru* “to pile up”. 八重山 *Yaeyama* uses the same kanji, 重.

[←131]
囮物語 *otorimonogatari* “decoy tale”.

[←132]
後ろ髪を引かれる *ushirogami o hikareru*, literally “to have one’s hair pulled from behind”, figuratively “to do something with painful reluctance”. Contrasting with 前髪 *maegami* “bangs” (literally “front hair”).

[←133]
Originally, this was a pun on 吹く *fuku* “to brag” and 服 *fuku* “clothes”.

[←134]
八岐大蛇 *Yamata no Orochi* (literally “eight-forked great snake”), 八つ当たり *yatsuatari* “venting one’s anger” (literally eight-way attack”).

[←135]
From *Doraemon*. Shizuka was a character infamous for having many bath scenes.

[←136]
スパ *supa* “spa”, スーパー *suupaa* “super”.

[←137]
ギャップ萌え *gyappu moe* “gap *moe*”. “*Moe*” comes from 萌える *moeru* “to sprout”, so Nadeko contrasts it with 萎え *nae* from 萎える *naeru* “to wilt”.

[←138]
うちなー時間 *uchinaa jikan* “Uchinaa time” (Uchinaa being the name for Okinawa in the Okinawan language). The unique sense of time held by Okinawan residents, suggesting that meetings and events can be later than their scheduled time due to the more relaxed lifestyle of Okinawa.

[←139]
首を長くする *kubi o nagakusuru*, literally “to extend one’s neck”, but meaning “to eagerly look forward to something”.

[←140]
鱗 *uroko* “scales”, 迂路子 *Uroko*.

[←141]

成果 *seika* “accomplishment”, 正解 *seikai* “correct”.

[←142]
大人物 *daijinbutsu* “great person”. The first two kanji can be read as 大人 *otona* “adult”, and the meaning of 人物 *jinbutsu* can be elevated, hence “personage”.

[←143]
家庭教師 *katei kyoushi* “private tutor” can literally be interpreted as “a teacher within the family”.

[←144]
家庭教師 *katei kyoushi* “private tutor”, 反面教師 *hanmen kyoushi* “bad example to learn from” (literally “reverse teacher”).

[←145]
空母 *kuubo* “aircraft carrier”. Contains the kanji for 母 “mother”.

[←146]
八百長 *yaochou* “fixed game”, contains 八百 *happyaku* “eight hundred”.

[←147]
出来過ぎ *dekisugi* “too good”, 出来レース *deki reesu* “rigged race”.

[←148]
修める *osameru* “to make amends for”, 治める *osameru* “to subdue”, 目覚める *mezameru* “to awaken”.

[←149]
船出 *funade* “to set sail” or “to start anew”. Because it quite literally means the embarking of a ship, it is not quite appropriate for boarding an airplane, though the figurative meaning still holds.

[←150]
群れ *mure* “pack, group”, 蒸れる *mureru* “to be stuffy, humid”.

[←151]
The kanji for “human” is 人.

[←152]
迂路子 *Uroko* literally means “detour child”. (See note 66.)

[←153]
作戦 *sakusen* “strategy”, 作品 *sakuhin* “work (of art)”.

[←154]
職掌 *shokushou* “official duties”, 食傷 *shokushou* “surfeit, overindulgence”.

[←155]
呪い *noroi* “curse”, 鈍い *noroi* “sluggish”.

[←156]
迂路 *uro* “detour”, referencing 洗人迂路子 *Araundo Uroko*. 雨露 *uro* “rain and dew”, referencing 臥煙雨露湖 *Gaen Uroko*. And 虚 *uro* for “hollow”.

[←157]
格差 *kakusa* “disparity”, 格の差 *kaku no sa* “difference in status”.

[←158]
The text is written as 仕事 *shigoto* “work” and given the furigana すき *suki* “like”. The double meaning becomes “Doing it for work” and “Doing it because you like it”.

[←159]
噛み締める *kamishimeru* “to chew thoroughly”. 締める *shimeru* “to tie, to fasten”. 締切 *shimekiri* “deadline”.

[←160]
皮肉 *hiniku* “sarcasm”, 肉 *niku* “meat”.

[←161]
納得 *nattoku* “to be convinced” shares the same kanji as 納税 *nouzei* “paying taxes”.

[←162]
千里の道も一方通行 *senri no michi mo ippou tsuukou*, translation as given. A spin on the phrase 千里の道も一歩から *senri no michi mo ippo kara*, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

[←163]
絞める *shimeru* “to strangle”, 締める *shimeru* “to tie off, to end”.

[←164]
Instead of でした *deshita* “this was”, it was written as で死た *deshita*, with 死 *shi* for “death”.